The Keynote

Alphonse de Châteaubriant

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(MONSIEUR DES LOURDINES)

BY

ALPHONSE DE CHATEAUBRIANT

TRANSLATED BY

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PREFACE

IT has been a privilege to translate a work so daintily, so poetically written, as the volume which started on its French career as "Monsieur des Lourdines" and is now presented to English readers as "The Keynote."

That it won the grand prize of the Académie Goncourt is a tribute not only to its own inherent qualities but also to the perception of those who exercise the right of selection. Its merit lies, not in liveliness of plot, wealth of incident, or pandering to the elemental passions, but in the extraordinary delicacy of its appeal to the best and purest side of human nature. It touches that sense of poetry and mystery which, often jealously concealed if secretly acknowledged, lurks in the background of the majority of cultivated minds.

The title chosen for the English version may seem at first sight to have little connection with the story, but it is hoped that it will quickly vindicate itself. It is indicated in

these lines by Romain Rolland: *"Tout se que touche l'amour, est sauvé de la mort."*

Love is the *Keynote* of the Book.

The author has demonstrated the complete victory, by simple force of love, of an insignificant-looking, unfashionable father, over the smart, selfish, superficial character of his son. Love of nature, love paternal, love patriarchal for property and dependants, love of music, a spirit without guile or rancour, transform a shy, ill-dressed, half-educated country squire, into a Bayard *"sans peur et sans reproche."* With barely a word spoken on either side, the conflict between two almost irreconcilable natures wages; deft touches allow the reader to delve beneath the surface, and watch the progress of affairs. The scene where the final subjugation of the son's hard egoism is accomplished, quite unconsciously, by the modest hero of the book, is one of sheer poetry. The contrast between the beauty of his mind and the homeliness of his exterior, is a masterpiece of imagination.

As is well known on both sides of the Channel, the late Edmond de Goncourt bequeathed a considerable sum of money, to found an Academy for the encouragement of young

writers. Its members are paid, and in them is vested the power to award each year a prize of two hundred pounds, to the best work of fiction.

The name of Alphonse de Chateaubriant is comparatively new in the modern world of Letters. With one stride, this youthful author has stepped into the front rank. Thanks to the Académie Goncourt, he has been accorded instant recognition; and those who, but a short while ago, knew nothing of his talent, now acclaim him as the most gifted of contemporary prose-writers.

"The Keynote" is offered with full confidence in its intrinsic excellence, but with an appeal for the indulgence of cultured readers, in view of the many difficulties that beset the path of the translator of a work, the merit of which lies so largely in grace of diction and distinction of style.

THEODORA DAVIDSON.

PART I

THE KEYNOTE

CHAPTER I

FOR two long hours four men had been working inside a trench dug round the foot of a gigantic young elm. They were hacking great gashes into its sides. Practically every root was severed, yet the tree stood firm. The fresh white wood quivered under their blows. The men strained and gasped as they swung the axes rhythmically round their heads. The proprietor stood watching, a few paces away. At each stroke his features contracted painfully, and every now and then he cast a glance, half sad, half angry, at a window of the château, just above his head.

"What a pity! What a shame!" he muttered regretfully.

"These healthy roots need double the amount of work and strength!" grunted one of the fellows, as he rose to take breath.

It was mid-November. Rain had fallen steadily for over a week; moisture clung to the leaves; a silvery radiance, half mist, half rime, clothed the woods; vapour hovered in clouds above the earth in the surrounding pasturage.

At length one of the gang, a sturdy greybeard in a short blouse belted round the waist, threw down his axe and the others quickly followed suit. He pushed tentatively at the trunk and gazed up into the branches.

"Well, Célestin?" queried his master, "is it time for the rope, do you think?"

"I reckon so," drawled Célestin, proceeding leisurely to fasten the end of a cord which lay ready coiled on the ground, around his middle.

Meanwhile the others had emerged from the trench, scarlet in the face and mopping the sweat from their brows, for the morning was close and the atmosphere saturated with humidity.

Célestin was adjusting the ladder against the elm when his master hurriedly interposed:

"Hold on, Célestin! wait a moment! Come now, frankly I don't care to see you

doing that at your age. Can't you leave it to one of the others?"

"One of the others, Master! Yes, very likely! The sort of thing I would do, eh?" and Célestin toiled heavily up the ladder, the top-most rung of which just reached the point where the trunk tapered away sufficiently to allow of climbing.

"We dursn't interfere," grinned one of the yokels; "he be a rare old squirrel!"

Célestin clung for a moment, the rope uncoiling beneath him. He had thrown his arms round the tree, bending his ear to its side, as if listening to the heart-beats of the victim. Presently he began to raise himself inch by inch. His loins worked with lizard-like suppleness; the bark crackled in the grip of his bare toes; finally his horny heels disappeared among the green branches, and his movements could only be measured by the slow unfurling of the rope along the trunk.

"Hello!" shouted one of the men, shielding his mouth with his hands to make his voice carry, "Célestin! Hi! are you all right?"

They listened; the sound of a song floated down in reply. The soughing of the breeze

in the leaves veiled both words and tune, but they recognised the local chanty:

"Il était un bounhomme,
Qui gardait dos agniâs,
Qui gardait dos agniâs."

* * *

"Sings like a nightingale, does old Célestin," they chaffed.

The bit of ground where they stood was a grassy open space, much defaced by the tread of cattle, and bordered by ancient trees under whose shelter nestled some farm-buildings. It was an insignificant corner of the property and was practically deserted. The chief portion of the traffic centred round the courtyard on the opposite side, where stood the offices, cow-sheds, stables, and out-houses. At the further end of an avenue of the splendid chestnuts so universally found in the thickly wooded land of Poitou began the open country.

Beyond the trees the ground fell away, black and peaty, intersected by treacherous, moss-grown marshes. The woods covered approximately two hundred and fifty acres, starting from the two wings of the château. The latter was an old dwelling-house in Louis

XIII. style, bearing in its aspect a certain dignity which proclaimed its right to rank as a "maison de noblesse."

Its long single storey was surmounted by a saddle-backed roof, the slates of which, thickly overgrown with moss and yellow lichen, sloped steeply forward over diamond-paned casements. The walls had faded to a uniform warm buff. To the right, a disused chapel reared its slender cross above a vigorous fig-tree.

It was, in very truth, a kingdom of silence, tenderly sheltered from the bustle of the world beyond. The chance traveller, journeying thirty miles from Poitiers along the high-road would pause when the mouldy retreat broke upon his astonished gaze, and to his wondering questions would receive answer: "Oh, don't you know? That château belongs to Monsieur Timothée, our Monsieur des Lourdines—that is Petit-Fougeray!"

Célestin had fastened the line round the top of the elm. He now came slithering down as if the trunk were a greasy pole. On reaching the ground he shook himself like a terrier and rubbed his eyes vigorously to rid them of the dust they had collected among

the ants' nests above. His comrades who had returned to the trench, teased him:

"What price climbing? It's your slender figure does the trick!"

"That's all right," answered Célestin. "I carry my fat inside, like the goats."

"Why don't you get married, old chap? With a voice and a pair of legs like yours, there ought to be no difficulty."

"Thank you for nothing, boys; I'm not out for that."

Then they fell to work again, making the chips fly with their hatchets, and chanting the while:

"Il était un bounhomme,
Qui gardait dos agniâs,
Qui gardait dos agniâs,
Il n'en gardait point guère
Il n'en gardait que trois."

Monsieur des Lourdines peered upwards to see whether the tree was beginning to move; he shook his head regretfully, like a man about to suffer a severe loss.

"What a pity!" he faltered again. "He was such a beauty!"

He was a small man of about sixty; the ordinary type of a country gentleman but without the rather aggressive assurance and stolid

self-possession which usually distinguish the loutish squires of sporting districts. He was narrow-shouldered but his slenderness was suggestive of nervous strength. His well-knit figure was alert and wiry. His thin, sensitive features and prominent cheek-bones were domed by the broad brow of the dreamer. A pair of intensely blue eyes looked out from beneath their long, heavy lids, with the trustful candour of a child. Into the patient face, deeply scored by lines of sorrow, there came at times a gleam of some great inward content, rippling over it like sunshine breaking through clouds. He wore a weather-stained old corduroy coat, a battered felt hat, and a pair of strong sabots which kept his feet snug and dry.

It would have been hard to pick out a man more completely in accord with his surroundings than was this little country squire in his ancient château. Both belonged to the soil; both had, as it were, faded together. This might possibly be explained by the fact that for centuries the des Lourdines had lived and died at Petit-Fougeray; they had always enjoyed some measure of consideration, were well-connected, and possessed comfortable means.

Unfortunately, under the rule of the present holder the family was beginning to lose position. Monsieur des Lourdines was an invincible recluse, and though he did not so much object to seeing people himself, he did very particularly object to being seen, so that his neighbours had at last given him up as hopeless and suffered him to shut himself up in his Fougeray, like a pigeon in the cote. He was perfectly content. One of his delights was the improvement of his property, not for the sake of gain, but for sheer love of the land. When people reproached him for never going to town, he listened quietly and said: "True, true, I suppose I shall die without having lived."

He spoke seldom; still less could he be induced to hold conversation with his equals; but the local postman, or the village constable knew that when they met *"not' Monsieur"* on their rounds, they would be button-holed, led into a certain arbour under the lime-trees, given a glass of white wine and questioned as to their movements and doings in kindly tones which betokened, not curiosity, but genuine interest in themselves.

In the same way, on Sundays after Mass, the labourers were expected at the bowling-

green the squire had made for the purpose, to "play bowls with Master" or "Monsieur Timothée." No girl on the estate would have dreamt of marrying without consulting him. In short, little though he realized it himself, he had become the arbiter of the destiny of the whole country-side.

He was a slave to habit. The bare suggestion of change filled him with discomfort. Thus day after day passed in unbroken monotony. He rose early and went down to the courtyard to take a look round the stables and cow-houses; he loved strolling through the comfortable sheds, fragrant with the suggestion of animal life and warm milk, before encountering the fresh morning air. He then made the round of the kitchen-gardens, marked the amount of dew, pinched the pears on the walls, pulled up a weed or admitted air to a garden-frame, and invariably wound up operations by a crack with Célestin, his bailiff, odd-man, factotum, crony. The two were never at a loss for a subject. One day it would be an improvement in drainage; another, widening a forest-ride or planting out an empty space in the grounds.

These early morning talks were a never-failing satisfaction to both master and man.

Later, he would retire to his business-room in readiness to receive any of the farmers who might wish to discuss for the hundredth time the advisability of planting beets in the *Grelet* field, or sowing colza in the *réserve du Sourd*. He farmed on the co-operative system. Perhaps he would indite some such letter as the following: "My dear Magui, don't forget that the fair at Thouarsais is coming on soon, etc., etc."

These and kindred avocations passed the time until *déjeûner*. As a rule he ate his meals alone, on account of his wife's invalid habits; but at stated intervals Madame des Lourdines made a gallant effort to join him, in deference both to his wish and to her doctor's orders. Her journey downstairs was quite a little event, and was a work of time and difficulty. The staircase being narrow and Madame des Lourdines stout, she occupied the whole width of the steps; Monsieur des Lourdines therefore followed, laden with shawls, pillows, and a footstool, beguiling the tedium of the way and diverting the sufferer's attention with jokes and little stories. The return to her rooms was a still more serious affair. She had to be coaxed up each step like a child, with little encouraging words:

"Now then! Once again! One for the cat! two for the parson!" One name only was carefully avoided. No one said, "One for Monsieur Anthime!"

She was a woman of great determination, the daughter of a leading magistrate of the Court of Poitiers. She exacted implicit obedience to her orders. It was by her wish that the elm had been sacrificed. Her unfortunate husband had made use of every possible subterfuge. He had even tried the effect of a blunt refusal, but she remained adamant, and finally gave way to temper. As the effects of anger were dangerous in her state of health he was forced to consent at last, but it nearly broke his heart.

The first half of Monsieur des Lourdines' day practically resembled that of the majority of country gentlemen; it was in the later part that he broke loose from tradition.

Regularly every afternoon, after spending a few moments with his wife, he took his spud, called his dog, and left Petit-Fougeray to engulph himself in the forest or stride across country as if the devil were at his heels. The neighbouring land consisted of wooded groves, gloomy lanes, with here and there a blue vista of distant uplands across smiling

valleys whose scent of sweet grasses and wild-flowers rose aromatically to the tiled roofs of crumbling hamlets perched above on the hill-side.

It would have been difficult to catch the Squire when he was fairly off on one of his wild rambles, vaulting hurdles and stiles, passing from one field to another, up-rooting thistles, destroying mole-hills, killing adders. Yet, a very little thing would suffice to arrest his attention and start him off on one of his long day-dreams: the reflection of a bit of blue sky in a puddle, a bird fluttering in a bush, the creaking of a plough. He never tired. He would walk on and on till darkness fell, watching, listening, hearing voices in the air, reading signs in the clouds overhead; solitary, and at peace.

* * * * *

As the men neared the completion of their task they threw more and more vigour into their blows. The two principal roots had shared the lot of the others and the tangle of severed ends combined to form a stump like some gigantic clubhead, steeped in the blackish water which had oozed from the sides of the trench. The axes struck down-

ward with the hollow reverberation of voices in an empty house. Stray birds perching for a second to pipe a note or two, flew off affrighted at the sound.

"God, what a murder! What a crime!" ejaculated Monsieur des Lourdines at intervals.

He was profoundly moved by this wanton act of destruction. It caused him positive torture to fell a tree in full health and vigour.

"It is moving!" cried Célestin.

The men threw down their tools and seized the rope.

"We must look out for ourselves!"

"All right, all right! It must fall that side!"

"Pull this way! round here!" shouted Monsieur des Lourdines, running up. He was afraid one of the boughs might damage the roof of the château.

The men had harnessed themselves one behind the other, and were straining vigorously, digging their heels into the turf and giving steady pulls in unison.

"Now then! all together! One! Two! now again!"

The eight brawny arms lay along the rope like a knotted brown thong.

Gradually a slow quiver passed through the limbs of the forest giant; the trunk swayed slowly; a crackling sound like flames licking dry wood started at the roots, spread, multiplied, burst forth into a rending, tearing, splintering, thundering crash, and the great tree started on its last journey.

The men hurried, helter-skelter, into safety.

With a dull thud that shook the earth, the whole space around was instantaneously covered with a hurtle of smashing boughs and fluttering leaves, strewn as if by some furious storm. For an instant more the monster was convulsed throughout its length, and then, gently, passed to its long rest.

Monsieur des Lourdines had turned and was moving quickly away.

Then someone appeared at one of the windows: a woman; her large face was wreathed in grey curls, her broad figure clothed in a white dressing-gown with frills at the neck and wrists. She waved her arms expressively, as if exclaiming—

"I saw it all! I was watching! I saw the tree fall! Good indeed! Now one sees daylight at last!"

CHAPTER II

THAT afternoon the master started on his usual tramp. At the end of the avenue, Célestin overtook him, standing upright in a farm-cart in company with a calf, three sheep and a litter of sucking pigs he was conveying to market. A big fair was to take place the following day at Poitiers. Célestin was to buy a cow.

"Choose one with a healthy-looking udder," the Squire called after him, "and mind it's a roan. The mistress is particular about that, and it's safer to get what she likes."

Célestin waved his whip in answer, and rumbled off up the hill towards Crêneraie, while his master turned downwards in the opposite direction.

His appearance was proof sufficient that he had no intention of going among people: he wore loose waggoner's top-boots and a faded bottle-green coat, and carried a game-bag slung over his shoulder and a spud under his arm. His dog "Lirot" trotted at his

heels. He was a big mongrel, with a pointed muzzle and a wiry black coat. Every now and then a glance of comradeship passed from the blue eyes of the man to the yellow ones of the animal.

The sky was steel-grey, dotted here and there with rain-clouds.

Monsieur des Lourdines loved walking. The regular measure of his footfalls fed his brain with a rhythmical flood of thoughts and dreams. Autumn, too, was his favourite season; he felt nearer akin to Nature, more closely in touch with her moods, through the soft caress of its humidity on his cheek; he revelled in its murky scent, its veiled atmosphere.

"Well, Lirot boy, are we going to have a good day?"

His eyes rested absently on the distant hills and the red-tiled roofs which showed faintly through the yellowing leaves of the trees; he smiled to himself at the prospect of entering the forest and remaining there until nightfall.

A singular motive had led him of late to take his walks in another direction. He had deliberately denied himself, in order to en-

hance the full rapture of his first sight of the fulfilled glory of autumn.

As he neared the long-anticipated treat, his spirits rose; he forgot the elm and wanted to sing. When it broke upon his view, glowing golden on the hillside, his heart throbbed, and he hastened his steps. Softly, noiselessly he trod, like one entering a sanctuary.

"Ah!" he breathed happily. "How good! How beautiful!"

He stood with upraised head, motionless, watching, listening.

There had been no lifting of the slightly thickened atmosphere. A brooding fog bathed the bracken, the blackened tree-trunks, and the arm-like boughs with their wreathing branches. One of these had snapped, and hung, ready to fall. The tapering stems of young firs detached themselves faintly from the encircling mist; and amidst this transformation from woodland tangle into a lofty illumined nave, beneath this dome of leafage parched by treacherous winds, there lay a lower realm; a damp litter of buck-thorn and elder, harmonizing with the purple of hazels and the saffron of maples. Moisture trickled from the twigs, clung to the spider's

webs, and soaked into the slimy bark; leaves detached themselves and fell, saturated, one by one, on to the quiet earth beneath. One felt that this languid drip, drip, and the absolute calm, spread away into immeasurable distance; for the forest of *Vouvantes* is immense and gloomy, and full of wild glades and gorges, a relic of ancient Gaul. Barely forty years before, the last remnants of the Vendean insurgents had been mown down among the undergrowth. Two military roads, cut through its depths, still afforded evidence of the foresight of Napoleon; but they were now only disturbed by the passing of the diligence from Poitiers to Nantes, or by occasional carriers' carts.

Lirot had rushed deliriously into the brushwood. Monsieur des Lourdines followed. He advanced cautiously, parting the tight embrace of the stems, forcing a passage for his feet amongst the mass of sodden leaves. Low branches snapped together behind him, and with bent back and eyes fixed intently upon the ground at his feet he moved slowly forward through bracken and brambles.

Lirot barked a signal to his master, but the

latter took no notice. In the thickest of the tangle he had again stopped short, watching . . . listening. . . .

The spaciousness and silence never failed at first to give him a queer feeling of insignificance; then by degrees a consciousness of some mysterious affinity with the tree-world would grow upon him. No longer was he Timothée des Lourdines, a man of middle age; the sap of chestnuts and beech trees filled his veins; his spirit, detached from his body, floated away into space, mingling with the shapes and sounds of the forest.

How well he had learned to understand the trees in the course of the thirty-eight years he had spent among them! His first realization of the joy it was theirs to bestow dated back to the time when he had at last escaped from the thrall of the gloomy college at Poitiers where his father, a soured, eccentric *émigré,* had placed him. He had remained within its hated walls until the death of his father had set him free. He returned to Petit-Fougeray a shy, unsociable youth of twenty. His early training was probably responsible for his faults of manner. He had never been able to acquire polish or ease in society. He dreaded and

hated meeting his fellow-creatures. Thus having reduced his relations with humanity to their narrowest limits, he was thrown back upon Nature for companionship. Divine hours he had spent among the trees! The tender, harmonious impressions he gathered from them were so infinitely superior to the vain cackle of drawing-rooms. Here there might be an occasional report from a broken branch, the barking of a dog, the creaking of a cart in the distance . . . nothing more! No voices of men broke the beneficent silence. Amongst his present surroundings, the recollection of human countenances took on the unreality of the embryonic forms one sees in the clouds, and by a curious trick of fancy they appeared to him faded and brown, like old wood! . . . Of the faces he had met in life, few were unconnected in his memory with experiences of boredom or constraint. For this reason he genuinely preferred the solitude and simplicity of the forest, so eloquent of Nature's bounteous mother-love, so free from the trivialities and meannesses of human intercourse.

Suddenly Lirot barked again, sharply, urgently.

"All right! All right! I'm coming!" cried Monsieur des Lourdines, rousing himself from his dream.

When his master reached him, Lirot, who was pointing, stopped barking, and his eyes narrowed to two slits. Monsieur des Lourdines bent down and picked a great round fat mushroom from between the dog's paws.

"That's right, old boy; now find me another," he said, patting him on the head.

He turned the mushroom over and over, examined it minutely, cut the stalk off neatly with his knife, breathed away the earth adhering to the skin as gently as if he had been blowing a fly from the cheek of a child, and slipped it into his game-bag.

Then he began searching on his own account.

Mushrooms were to him the very essence of the forest; their taste was reminiscent of both earth and tree. There were plenty about to-day; a week of rain will produce a fine crop.

In the midst of his search he remembered that he must be about a mile and a quarter from where a breech-tree had been badly barked a few days before by a cart-wheel. He wished to inspect the amount of the dam-

age again, so, after gathering a goodly store from amongst the dead leaves, he bent his steps in the required direction.

As he walked he searched the undergrowth, and when Lirot barked he went to him. It must be admitted that his training of the dog as a mushroom hunter was not an unqualified success: Lirot could only recognize three varieties, and his bark usually announced which of the three he had found, a genuine mushroom, a pompion, or one of those little whitish auricles that smell so strongly of flour. Sometimes it turned out that the good little fellow's find was large and brilliantly coloured, one of those flaunting purple and gold parasols which seem made for the use of some Lilliputian fairy; but when this happened, he got a good scolding.

The road, all churned up by farm-waggons, wound its way through the woodland. A wood-pigeon flew out from a tree, birds twittered their autumn lilt, occasionally darting away with a strip of alder left over by the basket makers, in their tiny beaks.

Passing through a glade where stacks of withies ready peeled lay ranged in rows, he found two wood-cutters sitting by a brush fire.

One of them was fanning the flames with his hat.

"Hullo, hullo! Good morning, my lads!" cried Monsieur des Lourdines. "Be careful, won't you, or you'll be setting fire to the forest."

"That's all right, Master," replied the elder of the two, a gaunt, sallow-faced, red-headed fellow, "we'll take care. A fire clears away the shavings and warms up the soup too. Now then, Théophile, put it on."

"What soup have you got, my lads? Cabbage soup?"

Théophile grinned and glanced at his mate. The latter answered nothing, but picked up the wallet which lay among the fagots and pulled out of it a fine fat bird, ready plucked.

"There you are!" he said, flashing a quick look at the tops of the trees.

"Oh! a rook!"

"Yes. It's a fine meaty thing, a rook. But, Master," added Théophile, with a sly wink, "I see you have your game-bag with you. Have you had good sport? I know there is a hare in that bottom over there, near Chézines."

"Now then, now then, Théophile," protested Monsieur des Lourdines good-humour-

edly, "you must have your joke. You know I don't destroy hares, and that I do more mushroom-gathering than shooting. I have found a few this morning. Would you like some?"

"Why, bless me, it isn't a bad idea, sir—eh, Barbechat? 'Twould give the soup some kind of a flavour."

"Rather!"

Monsieur des Lourdines opened his bag and dropped mushrooms one by one into the blouse Barbechat held out to him.

A low wind soughed through the trees; tomtits warbled near by, the fragrant wood smoke rose under the rhythmical flapping of Théophile's hat, and little spurts of flame began to crackle with a homely sound.

* * * * *

"Goodness! how they have damaged the poor thing!" growled Monsieur des Lourdines indignantly as he examined the beech-tree. "The cart must have dashed into it cornerwise. There was heaps of room, too."

His gaze travelled over the tree, resting pitifully on the gaping rent in its side, where insects were already at work. Then, from the bag at his side he took a tin box, dipped a

slender brush into some liquid bees' wax and gently dabbed the wound.

"Down, Lirot! Leave it alone!" he called chidingly to the dog who had run up to investigate, and was sniffing at the sweet, sticky streaks. "It's not for you, I tell you. Down! There my poor old boy . . . just another touch in this corner . . . and one here . . . there then, perhaps you'll last your time, after all, poor old chap."

Meanwhile the fog had lifted. The sun glowed crimson through the trees. The rooks had not returned from the valley. Though the afternoon was not yet spent, the indefinable hush of approaching evening could already be discerned by the loving eye of Monsieur des Lourdines. He knew the moment when the robin red-breast lowers his song and retires into the thicket, when the breeze whispers a good-night among the leaves, and the light grows faint and melancholy.

The game-bag was full, and judging by its weight, might have contained two hares at least; no sportsman returning home after a successful day's shooting could have felt

prouder or cheerier than did Monsieur des Lourdines.

He scraped the soles of his boots with his spud, to clear them of the lumps of earth and leaves and chestnut-peel adhering to them.

His thoughts wandered back to the woodmen. "Lucky fellows!" he ruminated. "That's real happiness!" This was one of his favourite remarks. He would make it at sight of a weaver working cosily at his hand-loom by the fire-side, or of a chair-mender in his thatched cottage; always: "Lucky chap! that's what *I* call happiness!"

A skurry of rain passed over the forest; the birches quivered in the sudden breeze; a rosy glow outlined the gauntness of a dead oak tree. He stood watching it all and enjoying the touch of the moist wind on his brow and of the damp earth at his feet.

"Death . . . death . . . " he reflected. "When trees die they remain standing. Perhaps they even retain some consciousness of outside influences; but we poor devils! We never see or hear again. Well, well, I suppose I'm good for another twenty years. I wonder! Am I good for another twenty years?"

He sauntered along a stony path, his iron-

shod boots ringing on the rocky surface, their tops brushed by the wet broom and bracken. A weazel darted across; Lirot was after it in a second.

"To heel, Lirot!" he shouted. "Your business is to hunt mushrooms. Don't you forget it!"

He held the barking dog tight by the collar till the little fugitive disappeared into a hole in the bank. Then he moved on again, for dusk was now falling fast; the humid gold of the evening was turning dank and dim.

In a deep hollow of the forest stood an old thatched house, whence floated a thin streak of bluish smoke. Monsieur des Lourdines never passed along the slope above without gazing thoughtfully down at this "Charvinière," a small farm which had belonged to Petit-Fougeray for four generations. His parents had left him there as an infant when they emigrated, and he had remained in the care of the farmer and his wife until he went to college.

His recollections of those sunny days when his speech had been as that of his little peasant play-fellows, were among the most exquisite of his life. A host of trivial scrapes

and childish naughtinesses rose unbidden to his mind and brought a smile to his lips; but the picture that dwelt most constantly in his memory was of great wide fields of rape-seed stretching yellow, oh, so yellow, as far as the eye could reach. He could see himself standing, a tiny boy in a blouse, gazing delighted, dazzled, motionless. The bliss of the sight was printed deep on his brain and the remembrance of Charvinière was inextricably mixed with that of wide fields of rape-seed shining yellow as gold away into the far distance.

Unfortunately these happy memories had been clouded by sorrow in the last few years. This evening, as his gaze fell upon the peaceful thread of smoke floating blue above the woods, he stood dreaming of his son . . . the son who had deserted the home of his fathers to live in Paris, and who so seldom wrote or gave any sign of life.

It was a sad story.

The sight of Charvinière never failed to revive the full bitterness of it. Yet he could not keep away! The child had come after two years of marriage. Oh the joy, the love, it had brought in its little hands! How

proud its parents had been! The mother even more so than the father . . . she was dazed with the glory of having brought a man-child into the world! Unreasoning tenderness, foolish indulgence, were lavished upon the little heir; nothing seemed too delicate for his pampered appetite, too precious for his lordly acceptance; to cross him in the mildest way would have been the blackest of crimes.

One day, for instance, there was asparagus for dinner.

"Me want 'paragus," clamoured Anthime.

"*As*paragus," corrected his mother. "You must say asparagus, or you can't have any."

"Me want 'paragus."

"Listen, sonny. When everybody else has been helped, you shall have some, if you pronounce the word properly. Well, little man?"

"Me want 'paragus," giggled Anthime, naughtily.

His mother laughed and gave him a large helping.

College was considered too rough for such a tender plant, so a mild young priest was installed as his tutor.

Anthime was spoilt and over-dressed; at

ten years old he had silken under-clothing and the smartest of manly suits—his every whim was indulged, his fancies consulted; he had not even the opportunity of developing a temper. It must be admitted that he was a charming boy, merry, good-humoured, generous to a fault; but the deferential meekness of his tutor and the foolish encouragement of his mother fostered his natural self-indulgence and love of pleasure to an alarming extent. No one noticed his faults. His position as the heir and only child made every indulgence seem lawful. Nothing he asked for was refused; money flowed like water through his fingers.

At fifteen he was given a horse and buggy; many and narrow were his escapes from breaking his neck and other people's. One day he was giving a lift to the parish priest; he drove so rashly that he upset the poor man into a ditch and broke three of his fingers for him. He made amends by sending a five-pound note for the poor, as soon as he got home. At twenty he begged for a thoroughbred, and was at once given "Comte Caradec," by "Prince Caradec," a celebrated English race-horse, at a cost of two thousand pounds.

Anthime rode him, and won a great many

races. This was his initiation into gay life. With the friends he made on the turf he entered on a career of dissipation. One day he came back from Poitiers with his pockets full of gold won at the gaming tables. He walked about among the servants and peasants, saying, "Help yourselves, boys, there's plenty more where that came from."

Five years later, his father was called upon to pay eight thousand pounds' worth of debts.

There was a frightful scene. It was the first time Monsieur des Lourdines had ever been seen in a rage. Madame des Lourdines was so terrified that she shut herself up in a cupboard.

Shortly afterwards Anthime, who posed as the injured party and pretended his feelings had been lacerated by his father's straight speaking, shook the dust of Petit-Fougeray from his feet, and settled in Paris on an allowance of five hundred pounds a year.

Madame des Lourdines broke down completely under these trials; a stroke of paralysis laid her low; her body grew to an enormous size, and she never regained the full use of her limbs.

Both parents suffered inexpressibly. The dreary days passed by in gloomy silence.

The shadow of the absent one stood ever between them. His name was never mentioned. Legitimate pride had been betrayed, tender love deceived, the hopes of years dragged in the dust. The wounds thus inflicted would not bear discussion.

Yet the mother did not lose hope; she had never brought herself to believe in her son's conscious guilt. Her blind devotion was so ingenious in finding excuses for his conduct that little by little her husband, dreading the effect of contradiction on one whose health was so precarious, almost grew to acquiesce in her view. Both were at one in their ardent desire to see Anthime come home, marry, and take up the position open to him by right of birth and fortune; but though Monsieur des Lourdines allowed his thoughts to dwell on this happy termination of the family trouble he had but little faith in its probability.

On the evening in question he stood once more gazing sadly at the smoke of Charvinière where, from pure sentiment, he had insisted on sending Anthime to nurse. He watched the yellowing poplars which bordered the lane, and saw, rather than heard, the rustling of their leaves: a well-rope creaked, a white cap moved in the direction of the cattle-shed.

He dreamed that the clock had moved back thirty years, and that he would presently hear a laughing treble voice pierce the evening air with its shrill sweetness.

But nothing of the sort rewarded his expectant ear. Instead, he became aware of the sound of hoofs clattering on the gravel below; slowly and gravely an old white horse came into view, trudging alone, under a load of sacks of flour.

The sight of him relieved the tension of Monsieur des Lourdines' mind; he moved downward with alacrity, and fell to patting the animal.

The old white nag from the mill of La Bigne made the round of the villages thus every Monday, either collecting sacks of wheat or delivering loads of freshly ground flour. He ambled sedately ahead of his master, knowing full well the sequence of the round. If the miller, beguiled by some bit of gossip, forgot to give him the signal to stop, the horse went quietly on and the miller would presently be met panting in pursuit, waving his whip and calling.

Thus it happened on this occasion. A loud cracking of the whip sounded from

among the chestnuts, and Suire ran up, face and blouse white with flour, the regulation miller's cap with its hanging tassel on his head and a toothless grin on his flat countenance.

"Good morning, Master."

"Good morning, Suire. Where are you from now?"

The miller clapped his heavy hand on one of the sacks, raising a cloud of dust from the wheat, and replied:

"From La Taupinaie, where I got this fine bag of grain; that one comes from Purdeau and the others from Fouchaut, all farms of yours, Master."

"Oh, you've been to Fouchaut? The wheat is fine there this year, eh?"

"By Jove! it does weigh, sir!"

"Well, as you are on your way back to the mill," continued Monsieur des Lourdines, casting a farewell glance at Charvinière, "we may as well go along together. It's all on my way to Fougeray."

Suire slung his whip round his neck, and the two moved away, skirting the edge of the forest and talking as they walked. On their left lay the ploughed land, dotted here and there with scarecrows, their rags fluttering in the light evening breeze; and in front of them

the little white horse jogged soberly on, beneath the shadows of the overhanging branches, his hoofs beating a rhythmic tune on the stones of the lane, his head, tail, and sacks swinging to his ambling gait.

"What do you say to a drop of comfort, sir?" suggested Suire, as they approached his house.

The mill was placed on a height among the trees, and dominated the whole forest; its sails, silenced now for the night, stood out against their background of sky like the arms of a huge cross.

"It's a long time since you have been under our roof, Master," continued Suire, pointing out recent improvements, hen-roosts, pigeon-houses, cartsheds, nestling below the mill. "What do you think of that? I built it all with my own hands."

"What, the walls too?"

"Rather! All those walls. It was just a question of material, nothing more. Look at these flints; there is a quarry close by. I bought it for eight pounds. I paid two pounds on account. I get stone from it every day—you can reckon it out for yourself; a penny per square yard. I have worked forty already."

While they talked, Suire's wife had unharnessed the horse. She now stood, in her black peasant's hood, holding the horse's forelock, watching them with strange, vacant eyes, and laughing uncannily without sound. Presently she caught Monsieur des Lourdines' eye, touched her forehead with her forefinger, and, with a nod in the direction of her husband, winked, as who should say: "You mustn't listen to him . . . if you do . . ."

"But," proceeded Suire, "after the purchase was concluded, old Gaffer Pagis came to me and pretended that he held a mortgage on half the property. He insisted the sale was void and that he would have the law of me. 'Go on,' I said, 'you old joker. There isn't a mortgage or anything else—I know what you're after!' So to-morrow, as it's fair-day at Poitiers, we shall both go before the magistrate, and I shall say: 'Now then, I've bought the piece of ground and paid for it—that's the law, isn't it?' I shall tell him that, 'I've paid, I've paid, I've paid'!"

Suire mumbled the words with increasing vehemence.

"Now, Master, come to the store-room. I've got some nice sweet wine of this year's

making. Look there, look at my little wild friend!"

"What wild friend?"

"Why, there, under the wire netting. I bagged him in a furrow when he was a youngster."

Monsieur des Lourdines looked, and in a wired enclosure saw a little wild rabbit bounding about like an indiarubber ball. Monsieur des Lourdines had to call Lirot off.

They drank in the store-room and then went to the garden to inspect the flower-beds, the hedges Suire had made, the apple-tree which had produced apples enough to fill five hogsheads.

"He's a conscientious old beggar, that tree." Then he lowered his voice and pointed with his finger: "D'you see those brambles? a hare comes out of a hole there every morning, makes hay of my flower-beds and goes off by way of the wattle-hedge." The miller threw himself on his stomach with his face to the earth. "It's too dark for you to see now, otherwise I should have shown you his trail. But that's the way he comes and goes, sure enough. Do you see the hole?"

He put his hand gently into it.

"Ha! What did I tell you, Master?"

He withdrew it, holding a little bit of fluff in his fat fingers and blew it away.

"All right, my fine gentleman! When I've had my say with the magistrate to-morrow, I shall come back and settle your hash for you! But I see you have your game-bag with you, Master. Had any sport?"

Monsieur des Lourdines opened the bag and the miller peeped in.

"My word, they're a little bit of all right!"

"Hold out your blouse!"

While Suire expressed his thanks, Monsieur des Lourdines was saying to himself: "Lucky chap, Suire! That's a happy man!"

But it was time to start homeward. He held out his hand and Suire grasped and swung it ponderously to and fro.

"Good night, Suire."

The good wife stood under the porch and watched him pass, still laughing dumbly and tapping her forehead with her finger:

"Don't you listen to him, sir . . . because if you do . . ."

The twilight was nearly over. There remained of it only a violet tinge, spread over the face of the heavens. A few rain-clouds

floated, darkly blue, and in the mist beyond them lay Charvinière. Further off still, the forest reared its black crest.

Monsieur des Lourdines tramped steadily through the woods in darkness so opaque that boughs could no longer be distinguished from leaves. The dawdle at the miller's had chilled him and stiffened his muscles; his limbs felt heavy. But his thoughts, cheered by a day in the open, returned to the mill at Bigne. The leaves whispered metallically. He hurried, and Lirot bounded like a wolf among the trunks.

CHAPTER III

HE entered the avenue between the two tumble-down lodges which marked the approach to the château.

The moon floated pale and serene above clouds like wool bordered with flame. The sky was dappled white, fading into the soft blue of old brocade. Presently the sloping roof of the château, silvered by the argent light of the moon, emerged from the surrounding obscurity.

Madame des Lourdines' room was brightly illuminated, as usual; the flame shone mellow through the diamond panes.

The master of the house could never rid himself of a certain anxiety as to what might have happened, when he returned after an absence of any length; he feared to be met by old Perrine on the door-step with the news of another seizure. Sometimes he even went so far as to remain at home all day, but this was a bootless privation; it did no good either to the invalid or to himself.

But to-night Petit-Fougeray lay in the slumberous lethargy of its own aged brown bricks. The house was deceptive. It was not impressive from outside, but its interior revealed vast proportions. It was far too big for its few inhabitants, consisting of the master, mistress, and four servants. Therefore, only the left wing was inhabited. The right was entirely deserted. A long, narrow corridor gave access to a suite of spacious apartments, pannelled throughout with beautiful wood carvings, but empty of furniture. None of these rooms were put to their legitimate use. One was stacked with hay; Célestin kept the grain for the fowls in another; but in the third, which at some former period had probably served as a billiard-room, there was only an old sieve on a heap of barley; both had probably lain there, forgotten, for years. Dust had accumulated everywhere. The atmosphere of the rooms was icy and charged with the musty odour of mouldy hay and dry-rot; the cocoons of insects hung fluttering from the ceilings, and spiders had spun webs enough to furnish all the brides of the country-side with wedding veils.

The chapel was in ruins. Every year's

passage was marked by some additional damage; the steps had crumbled, one by one; there was a breach in the outer wall near the tribune, and another in the roof, whence fragments of lath and rotten slate dropped and piled themselves on the pavement below. A bough of the fig-tree outside had elbowed its way through one of the Gothic windows and flaunted its greenery amidst the general decay. The altar had fallen slantingly across a heap of planks and worm-eaten orange-boxes, and its gilded tabernacle lay propped between two peeling angels, whose stiff fingers still maintained a prayerful attitude beneath their scaly chins.

Monsieur des Lourdines went straight to the kitchen, whence proceeded the sound of blows from Perrine's meat-chopper.

"How is Madame?"

"God is still merciful, Master."

Estelle, Madame des Lourdines' little maid, sat in the light of the lamp, working at some fine sewing which covered her lap and fell to the floor. Between the two women, on a bench against the wall, sat a young fellow from a neighbouring village, a hand-loom worker by trade, who came in

regularly to spend the evening with them. Later, he would return home and could be heard singing, far into the night, while he sorted his bobbins.

"Here are the mushrooms; what have you cooked for Madame to-night?"

"A pasty of partridges, Master."

Madame des Lourdines was particular about her meals; she insisted upon being fed with tasty dishes and rich sauces.

Some underlinen was airing before the fire; the stock-pot simmered amidst the flames. Monsieur des Lourdines drew nearer to the warmth, took off his muddy boots, put on a pair of slippers, and stood leaning against the chimney-piece watching Perrine prepare his nightly repast of cabbage soup and new-laid eggs.

He was fond of dawdling in the kitchen, and never failed to spend a few moments there on his return from a country walk. He liked the scent of smoke and baking bread and boiling milk. The soft glow of the lamps lighted up the yellow-washed walls and shining coppers; stacks of wood from his own farms were spread to dry at the chimney-corner. His gaze rested affectionately on the ancient clock in the corner, with its grotesque

paintings and swinging pendulum, on the old copper candle-sticks, all battered and bent, the three guns hanging from the wall; they were full of associations, and held in his estimation a definite place in the order of things . . . they were almost sentient beings and had grown old in his service.

Another object of interest to him was a smoke-blackened print above the hearth. It represented an episode in the crossing of the Bérésina: an attack on some *voltigeurs* by a company of Cossacks. The features of the youthful officer in command bore some likeness to those of Anthime!

He lingered somewhat longer than usual on this evening, among the faggots and the clock and the old landmarks, for he dreaded his wife's conversation. He knew she would talk to him about the elm, and point out how right she had been to insist on its removal, and what an improvement its absence had effected in the lighting of her apartments. He felt sore on the subject and did not want it re-opened.

At length, when his meal was concluded, he went upstairs, stepping lightly and holding the rickety banister gingerly.

On the threshold his nostrils were assailed

by the familiar odour of spices and eau-de-Cologne. The decorations of the room were carried out in red and gold; the thousand and one silver and china knick-knacks with which it was crammed were reflected in various mirrors. Madame des Lourdines had a passion for crimson; even her candles were crimson. She was busy with Frédéric at the moment, giving him instructions for the morrow's purchases at Poitiers. The journey was made once a fortnight on the market-day, but as the distance was ninety miles there and back, the coachman put up the horse and buggy at an inn and spent the night in the town, returning the following day.

"You are sure you understand, Frédéric?"

"Yes, Madame."

A handful of gold pieces glittered in her fat, manicured hands. Little heaps of coins were arranged in a row on the marqueterie table in front of her.

She always sat in the same corner of the room, close to the window, under the shadow of a plush curtain.

She nodded in a preoccupied manner in answer to her husband's greeting; he crept silently over to the casement and sat down beside it.

Madame des Lourdines was a powerfully built woman; she had never been handsome. Her hair waved back from the temples and was covered with a black lace fichu. Her long narrow face, though finely modelled, was disfigured by the violet hue of the flesh, which showed through its thick coating of powder; the chin and neck fell in flaccid folds. She addressed the coachman in jerky tones, and a thickened utterance, and her beady black eyes seemed to pierce through him while she impressed upon him the details of the errands he was to perform.

Monsieur des Lourdines listened in silence and bent upon Frédéric much the same gaze as that with which he favoured the old furniture in the kitchen.

Frédéric was no longer young, but he still carried himself upright and his portly figure made a goodly appearance on the box-seat of his carriage. There were girls in the village who ogled him in vain, and would have been proud to own such a personable husband; but he, fearing that marriage would separate him from his master and his horses, passed them by and ignored their advances with the impassability of a church steeple among the swallows.

"Here's the list, Frédéric. Don't lose it; and four pounds for the commissions." She leant forward with infinite difficulty to hand him the money. "Don't fail to pay Dr. Lancier's bill; twenty pounds; here is the cheque. Now pay attention! You are to ask him to come . . . no, wait . . ." She paused for a moment. "No, say nothing about that. I will write."

She stared hard at the man, in the effort to collect her thoughts; for she prided herself on having preserved the clearness of her brain throughout her physical decline; it would have been a bitter mortification to her to be convicted of forgetfulness.

"Ha!" she exclaimed suddenly.

She pressed her hands on the arms of her chair and raised herself laboriously, pushing the table from her with a curious wriggle of one hip. She walked forward. The flooring creaked under the weight of her swaying bulk. She moved painfully, with nervous contractions of the soft fat fingers she could no longer clench. From a cupboard in the wall she drew a black silk bodice.

"There! You must go to Mademoiselle Godeau and return this bodice to her. It does not fit at all. She is to let it out at the

arm-holes or else make me another. I don't care which, but she must send me something that doesn't pin my arms to my sides! I can't move in this one."

Frédéric put out his hand.

"Wait! Are your hands clean? I had better pack it up. Is there an old newspaper anywhere about? Look, there is one on the chimney-piece. No, no, that is your *Constitutionnel,* Timothée. It has just come."

"You can have it if you like, Émilie."

"Really? Then give it to me, Frédéric. Oh, by the way, Timothée," she continued, unfolding the paper, "a letter came for you at the same time. It is there, on the chimney-piece."

Monsieur des Lourdines fetched the letter. It was addressed to Monsieur Le Comte des Lourdines. He made a wry face, for he disliked being addressed by a title he did not possess; besides, letters in an unfamiliar handwriting inspired him with more mistrust than curiosity. He was in no hurry to read them. He very often thrust them unopened into his pocket, one after the other, until some fine day he nerved himself to break the seals and wade through the accumulation.

This one was treated in the same fashion.

"Timothée," asked Madame des Lourdines, "are you wanting anything from Poitiers?"

"No, thank you, Émilie—no—I can't think of anything."

She gave a sign of dismissal to Frédéric, who pulled his forelock in acknowledgement before swinging round, presenting to view his red bull-neck and the grizzled locks curling low over it.

She made her slow, painful way back to her chair and sank into it panting and closing her eyes. It was no joke to direct a whole household from her invalid chair.

"You attempt too much, you poor dear."

"No, no, Timothée, don't you worry. Thank Heaven I have a good head. But have you remembered to give Célestin instructions about the cow he is to buy?"

"Yes. I said to him: 'You are to choose a roan cow. Madame particularly wishes it.'"

"That's right." She glanced towards the window. "The men worked at the tree until nightfall. They have chopped off all the branches. That is a good job done! Now I shall not have to strain my eyes, working in the dark, every afternoon."

Monsieur des Lourdines broke in hurriedly—

"All right, all right, Émilie! I'm glad you're pleased," and he scratched his hand nervously.

She was silent; her mouth broadened into a smile.

"I had a letter to-day, Timothée, from Madame Espic."

"Madame Espic?" he repeated.

"Yes; she talks a great deal about her daughter—"

"Her daughter?" he questioned again.

"Yes, I tell you, her daughter. Now listen, Timothée, the more I think about it—mind you, the girl will have a great deal of money—the more convinced I feel that we ought to try and manage something for Anthime in that quarter!"

Monsieur des Lourdines had already had experience of his wife's efforts at matchmaking on her son's behalf. Although he was not personally familiar with Paris life, he had sufficient imagination to guess that it would not be exactly easy to detach a young man from its fascinations for the sake of a marriage with an unknown bride in the coun-

try. He did not therefore feel very sanguine of her success.

"What do you think of doing, Émilie?" he questioned rather wearily.

She replied: "You let me manage by myself. You are not clever at that sort of thing. First of all, you don't understand your own son, Timothée, you never did. Now in these matters one has to be very tactful; one must know how to make people do just what one wants without their being aware of it; it is a science in itself. You could never do anything of the kind."

"I dare say not. But what about you, my dear? How are you going to set about it?"

"That's simple enough: I shall do a little manœuvring."

"Manœuvring! Now, I think it's best to go straight ahead and say what one means."

"May be, Timothée, may be; but just leave it all to me."

Monsieur des Lourdines said no more. He sat ruminating, his eyes fixed on the floor at his feet, yet seeing nothing.

A few minutes later he retired to his room. It was a Spartan apartment of four bare

walls; its sole furniture an iron bedstead, a chair, a table, and a cupboard.

He threw off his coat and put on a shabby old brown dressing-gown, passed his hand dreamily over his forehead, pushing back the heavy lock of grey hair which hung over his tanned forehead, then opened the cupboard, climbing on to a chair and lifted from its resting-place among a pile of old books on the top shelf, a violin case.

He opened it softly and carefully lifted out the instrument. It was a beautiful old violin. He swept his thumb over the strings, and proceeded to tune it; then polished it with a silk handkerchief till the ruddy wood shone; afterwards the bow received attention. He worked with loving care, a slight smile relaxing his features.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE of the recollections most often present in Monsieur des Lourdines' mind was that of Monsieur Crouillebois, the old violin-master, whose custom it had been in those remote school-days to await his pupil twice a week after luncheon in the courtyard outside the refectory. He could still see accurately with the eyes of memory the tall figure in the worn buff great-coat, from the pocket of which a yellow bandanna handkerchief invariably protruded. They would go to a certain class-room, bare and shabby and dirty, but with "the least bad acoustic properties," as the old master used to declare laughingly.

"Now, Monsieur des Lourdines, let us begin. How are your honoured parents? What, you have not heard from them? Dear! Dear! Well, we will go over that last exercise, if you please."

His parents, or rather his mother, had once written to the Principal, on some impulse,

and said that young Timothée might as well take violin lessons—and as no counter order ever followed, young des Lourdines remained Monsieur Crouillebois' pupil during the whole of his school days.

Those lessons were practically the only advantage he ever reaped from his College course. At its termination, he took the violin home with him, beloved companion of the only happy hours of his boyhood.

He had been fifteen years away; his father and mother were dead. He returned to the old deserted homestead; explored afresh the scenes of his childhood, the meadows within whose thick hedges, the young bulls grazed, the lanes, plunged in the everlasting obscurity of their overhanging trees, the Charvinière farm with its fields of colza shining yellow as far as eye could reach. It was a happy, happy time; his violin sang hymns of praise.

It sang in the evenings, after long days of tramping the country, or drowsy summer afternoons idled away among the hay and the grasshoppers. The music played by the ex-pupil of Monsieur Crouillebois was by no means limited to the pieces learnt with that estimable master. It consisted of his own

thoughts and dreams, of peasant laments, the song of the birds, the note of village chimes, the ringing of the blacksmith's anvil, the sigh of the wind, of all the sounds that penetrated to the inner hearing of this passionately loving son of Nature.

He felt that the melodies came to him through some outside influence; they overwhelmed him, made him dizzy with joy; he sought not to capture or remember them, but let them float unbidden through his brain; for he knew that harmonies inexhaustible live eternal in the trees, the flowers, the breeze; and like those who follow in the footsteps of the Lord, "he was not afraid neither was he dismayed."

When he first married, his wife enjoyed his music, but she soon wearied of it and said its wailing affected her nerves. So he betook himself further away. Almost every evening he shut himself up in his room with the instrument which had become the confidant of his memories, his emotions, the joys and woes and thoughts of his life.

The violin voiced his inarticulate feelings. It understood and could speak—so plainly indeed that the timid, reserved fellow to

whom it would have been sheer torture to open his heart to any human being, grew afraid of the indiscretion of his friend. He trembled lest those who heard should understand. He imagined that listeners congregated at his door to whisper and gossip over his self-revelation; his room was not far enough removed from the rest of the house. He therefore adopted a different plan. He waited until nine o'clock, the hour at which the domestics retired, then, cautiously he crept through the central hall and along the corridor of the disused wing; in one of the further rooms, shut in and alone, he gave himself up to his art and played by the light of the moon or of a solitary candle, half the night through.

For thirty years he had been doing this, sharing the deserted rooms with the spiders, the mice, and even the screech-owls; the latter are peculiarly sensitive to music and often came from the neighbouring woods to perch near the violin and listen.

In the course of those thirty years, the instrument had been the mouth-piece of the musician's daily life: it had discoursed of sunrise on the hills, of flocks peacefully cropping

the herbage, of young love, early disappointment, the joys and hopes of fatherhood followed by renewed disappointment, and finally of the rebellious son, and his departure—all these experiences had been wailed, sung, sobbed by the violin of worthy old Crouillebois' pupil!

On this special evening, his soul was full of music. The autumn perfume and whisper of the forest had stirred him profoundly. He felt as if its very essence had crept into his innermost soul.

Nine o'clock struck. The muffled sound came down the chimney from the clock on the summit of the roof.

He seized his violin.

But first he wondered whether it would not be desirable that he should free his mind of all preoccupation. He hesitated. Should he read the letter he had just received? He decided to do so, and, putting down the instrument, turned up the wick of the lamp.

With a knife he slit the envelope, a habit he had caught from his wife, who disliked to see a letter opened untidily.

"Monsieur le Comte," he read.

At first he could not grasp the meaning of what he saw; then he turned white; his hand shook and he dropped the missive:

"My God, what is this! Anthime! Wretched boy! . . ."

He could not see to read; a mist floated before his eyes and the words ran into each other.

He flew to the door.

"Émilie!"

But he stopped short, remembering swiftly that above all things his wife must be spared; his limbs failed him and he dropped into a chair, overcome by the violence of the blow.

He sat a long time, motionless, suffering horribly. His son's face stood out vividly before his mental sight. Hours passed; the lamp flickered; it had almost burnt itself out.

At length, with a shiver he awoke from his prostration, and the terrible words, *six hundred thousand francs,* twenty-four thousand pounds, danced viciously before his eyes: *twenty-four thousand pounds!*

Terror gripped him. He realized with anguish that all the farms must go.

No, he would *not* pay! He had done enough for his son. He would not relieve

him a second time of the penalty of his transgression.

Then his mood changed. He grew weak. His heart melted in self-pity. Was it within reason that he, who had never yet harmed mortal man, could be thus cruelly treated and his fortune wrested from him by alien hands? There must be some mistake. Surely the whole world would rise up in his defence.

What was there to prove that this letter from the money-lender Müller was not a swindle, an attempt at blackmail? How on earth could he find out? He was absolutely ignorant in money-matters; he knew nothing about them, but he was aware that vile extortions and cheating transactions could be perpetrated by evil-disposed persons.

The lamp had gone out; the hour was far advanced; he shivered with cold.

Motionless, his head bowed over his outstretched arms he pondered, irresolute, helpless as a child caught in the whirl of a new unknown world. He realized that he had held too much aloof from his kind, that the solitude he so prized had become a source of distress.

He started up. A name, a personality, had

suddenly occurred to him out of those forgotten days of the past. To this personality so strangely brought to his memory he grasped as a drowning man to a plank.

"I'll go to him," he muttered feverishly, "I'll go to him at once."

Relief brought a lump into his throat; he folded his hands as if in prayer, and raising his eyes, dim with tears, he moaned:

"It's been a mistake . . . One cannot live quite alone! A man must have friends!"

* * * * *

He left his room softly, walking on tiptoe through the entrance hall. The sudden contact with the night air made him shiver. The courtyard was damp and foggy. He crossed it quickly. Lirot stirred in his kennel, the "Comte Caradec" thrust his lean head and neck out of the loose-box.

Monsieur des Lourdines entered one of the buildings and felt his way up a narrow winding stair-case leading to a room above the stable. He stopped at the top and knocked at a white-washed door.

"Frédéric!" he called, and waited an instant.

"Frédéric!" he repeated, and knocked again.

The bed creaked and bare feet padded over the wooden floor.

"Frédéric, it is I!"

The footsteps hastened and the heavy door opened, creaking.

"Frédéric!" panted his master. "You are starting early for Poitiers . . . I had forgotten . . . I must go too . . . I will start with you . . . What time is it?"

Frédéric, only half awake, stood silent for a moment wondering whether this was all part of a dream . . . this holding the door open in his night-shirt and hearing the agitated voice of his master in the dark. Then he decided to look for the matches. When he had lit one, swearing a little under his breath as the first two or three broke off, sputtered, and went out, he lighted his lantern and held it up to the big silver watch which hung on a nail above his bed.

"Three o'clock," he replied, in a voice still hoarse with sleep.

"Get up! Get up! We must be off by four o'clock."

"Very good, Master. I'll go down at once and give the mare her feed."

In his surprise at the emotion manifest in his master's voice he raised the lantern to look at his face.

"Get on, get on!" urged Monsieur des Lourdines, as he turned and hurried down the stair.

* * * * *

When he got back to his room he lit the candle he had prepared for his vigil with the violin, for the lamp had gone out. By its wretched glimmer he changed his clothes feverishly, noiselessly, almost holding his breath. He hurried so that he muddled things; he had the utmost difficulty in getting his feet into his town boots, the leather of which had hardened and stiffened through want of use. He luckily remembered telling his wife he had no business to do in Poitiers, so he sat down and wrote her a note explaining that Suire, the miller, had a law suit coming on and had begged him to give evidence in his favour. He was sorry not to have recollected this when he was talking to her over-night.

He closed the letter without even noticing that he who had hitherto never told a lie, had just written one.

He slipped the note under his wife's door where she must see it on awaking; and softly, feeling his way along the wall and avoiding creaky boards, he crept away, without waking a soul.

A blue haze heralded the dawn; the fresh, brisk air of the early morning hours when the earth seems to have regained youth and vigour during the night, laid its cooling touch on his heated brow.

Wrapping himself in his heavy driving cloak he went to the stables and found Frédéric completing his preparations by the light of a lantern. A few hens, roused from sleep, cackled; the old white mare, ready harnessed, crunched her oats with a grinding sound.

Monsieur des Lourdines waited in the stable-yard, watching a friendly star, twinkling between two poplars.

He turned at the sound of the mare's footfalls on the cobblestones. She was being backed towards the buggy. Frédéric fetched his whip, a brush for the journey, and his hat, which he deposited on the horse-trough; then he lifted the shafts to the mare and fastened buckles and straps, casting curious glances the while at his master.

"Quick, Frédéric—quick!"

Frédéric pulled on his great-coat, but remembered he had left his leather wallet in the stable. He ran to fetch it—now the key of the cashbox was forgotten. At last everything was ready and Monsieur des Lourdines got into the cart. But he passed by the box-seat and threw himself into the other. The coachman handed him the reins, but Monsieur des Lourdines shook his head. "No—you drive—hurry up!"

They were off. The clock on the Château struck four as they rolled out of the gates.

Five long hours' drive lay before them, five hours in which to listen dreamily to the sound of the wheels on the road. They crawled up the steep side of the Crêneraie hill. It was the dark moment before the break of day. On either side the puddles in the cart tracks shone under the flash of the lamps; far away in the distance a light showed in some window; the panting breath of the mare rose in a cloud of steam above her head. White, gauzy vapours hovered low above the meadows. The woods were mysteriously outlined on the hills beyond.

"There's the forest," hazarded Frédéric,

pointing with his finger and hoping for a chat to while away the time.

Receiving no answer, he cracked the whip and put the mare into a trot.

CHAPTER V

THEY reached Poitiers at about nine o'clock. The market was in full swing and to Monsieur des Lourdines' annoyance the buggy was forced, by the crowded condition of the thoroughfare, to slow down to walking pace. The swarm of pedestrians, vehicles, and animals increased with every moment. There was not space in the narrow street for the accumulation of empty carts, stalls loaded with goods for sale, pigs struggling among the farmers' legs, and the huge umbrellas carried by every goodwife.

The buggy could only crawl at last; but the mare poked her nose into necks and shoulders, pushed between haggling couples and pressed steadily forward, indifferent to all obstacles.

Frédéric's numerous acquaintances shook him by the hand as he passed, calling out cheery greetings. Monsieur des Lourdines evaded recognition by leaning well back un-

der the hood; but notwithstanding this precaution he heard his name passed from mouth to mouth in the crowd. He cowered still further back and pulled his hat over his eyes.

The "Plat d'étain," patronized by the gentry and the more substantial merchants was on the further side of the town.

Rows of carriages already filled the courtyard when the Petit-Fougeray buggy drove in.

"Here we are at last!" murmured Frédéric, pulling up.

They threw off the rugs, and an ostler hurried up to take the mare.

Monsieur des Lourdines got down and stood, giddy and tired, trying to stamp the stiffness out of his limbs.

To him bustled the host, exclaiming jovially in stentorian tones:

"Monsieur des Lourdines! Never! Well, upon my word! Monsieur des Lourdines in Poitiers! Dearie me, and how are you, Monsieur des Lourdines?"

Monsieur Bricart was stout and rosy, with a thatch of wiry brown hair; he was an expert horse-coper and the friend of all gentlemen in the country-side.

"How . . . how are you, Monsieur Bri-

cart?" stammered Monsieur des Lourdines, unwillingly. "Be good enough to give me a room for to-night, will you?"

The weary traveller, lost in the folds of his vast driving-cape, could barely muster a smile. He would fain have fled, but the host button-holed him and wrung his hand—such familiarity was surely permissible with this unassuming little gentleman.

"Certainly, certainly, Monsieur des Lourdines. Come, let us crack a bottle together, eh?" fat Bricart proposed, pressing closer as Monsieur des Lourdines attempted to escape.

"Thank you, no, Monsieur Bricart, not just now."

"What, not a little glass just to pass the time of day? To get the fog out of your throat? Nothing like it for clearing the brain before a bargain! Come, just one!"

"No, thank you. Really, Monsieur Bricart, I cannot at present . . . I . . . I am not . . . not quite well . . . d'you see . . . not quite well . . . wine would upset me . . .;" and Monsieur des Lourdines made a further effort to evade the noisy attentions of worthy Bricart.

"Not well? The devil! A good Poitevin like you not well? Oh, come, come! Look

here, sir, a word in your ear. When I saw you come in just now, I said to myself: 'Monsieur des Lourdines has come to Poitiers to buy a new horse in place of the white mare, who is not growing any younger.' Luckily, I have the very thing for you—a chance you won't get twice in a lifetime. Thobie!" he called to a stableboy polishing harness in a shed, "Thobie, take the rugs off Bonbonne! Make haste, my lad!"

Monsieur des Lourdines looked anxiously about for a way to escape.

"No, really, Monsieur Bricart . . . pray . . . I am not buying this morning, I assure you . . . I am in a hurry—I am sorry I cannot wait. . . ."

"One minute, sir, I beg! There! What do you say to that!" and the dealer pointed proudly at a handsome black mare pawing the ground and whinnying at the door of her loose-box.

"Isn't she a beauty? Look at that shoulder! My word! And talk of trotting! She'll make anything she wants to pass on the road look silly! Monsieur Anthime wouldn't have wasted a second, I can assure you! She would be his by now! And I'll make the price nice and easy. You shall have her

for sixty pounds. Did you ever see such feet!"

"Yes, yes, indeed. She is a beauty, she's everything you say . . . " Monsieur des Lourdines threw over his shoulder, as he edged away, a frown of helpless annoyance carving a new furrow on his drawn face.

"Oho! I see! You want to go round the market first and see a little of everything! Well, you'll come back!"

But Monsieur des Lourdines had fled at last, striding over all obstacles and humping his back obstinately. "You'll come back, Monsieur des Lourdines, you'll have to come back! See if you don't!" mine host shouted after him; and as Frédéric approached, he addressed him inquisitively:

"Where is your master off to, Frédéric? He looks very queer."

"He hasn't said anything to me," replied Frédéric. "I only know that he woke me up in the middle of the night and ordered me to bring him here, and that he looked like a ghost, poor gentleman. Perhaps he's come to see a doctor!"

Monsieur des Lourdines had turned the corner He hurried to his goal as fast as he

could, eager for the advice he had come so far to seek.

Presently he left the crowd behind and entered a quiet side-street called the Rue des Carmélites. He could not remember the number of the house he was in search of. He asked a passer-by to tell him where Monsieur Lamarzellière lived, and was shown a little house standing back from the street within a pair of iron gates flanked on either side by two mountain-ashes and some bent yucca-trees.

A servant opened the door and having taken his card to her master, came back with orders to show him in at once. He stepped hastily over the threshold which he hoped would bring him salvation.

Monsieur Lamarzellière had been at school with him, and was, besides, distantly related to Madame des Lourdines. The formula he invariably made use of in presenting himself will be his best introduction to the reader: "I am, Sir or Madame, Councillor to His Majesty, at the Imperial Court of Poitiers."

Monsieur des Lourdines followed at the heels of the maid, tripping over the door mat in his haste.

The magistrate rose from his seat in a dark

corner, offering his right hand in greeting, while with his left he held his dressing-gown close over his breast.

"Des Lourdines! This is a surprise!"

He was a tall man. Long silvery hair, brushed well back, fell behind his ears, framing a gaunt sallow face.

"What good wind blows you here?" he exclaimed cheerfully; but long experience in reading the human countenance in the execution of his profession, caused him to change his tone directly:

"Sit down here, old man," he added gently.

"Lamarzellière! Lamarzellière!" cried Monsieur des Lourdines, suddenly breaking down and seizing the magistrate's hand. "Save me! Save me! You are my last hope! I have come . . . " he choked—tears rose to his eyes and threatened to overflow; the shadows on his cheeks grew purple. "One can't get on quite alone," he muttered through clenched teeth; "one needs a friend sometimes."

The Councillor stared in astonishment. He was a machine not a man; prim, narrow-minded, caustic.

"Of course, of course," he murmured reassuringly. "One has need of others, naturally.

But come, come, control yourself! What is the matter, des Lourdines?"

And tapping his shoulder gently, he endeavoured to calm his old schoolfellow, whom he had always looked down upon to a certain extent, as a good fellow, but something of a fool.

Monsieur des Lourdines pulled out his pocket-book, extracted a letter from it and handed it to his friend.

"Read that!" he said, throwing himself into a chair, and holding his head in his hands, while the Councillor walked to the window and raised the missive to the light.

Monsieur Lamarzellière read aloud:

"Monsieur le Comte . . ."

"Poor old boy, poor old boy!" he exclaimed, when he had finished. He wrinkled his nose in a manner betokening acute attention coupled with some anxiety.

"I send the boy forty pounds a month," exclaimed Monsieur des Lourdines, angrily: "forty pounds a month! He might have done on that, I should have thought! It's a good allowance, even for Paris—and I would have given more if he had asked for it. I received that letter last night; my poor wife handed it to me herself. She knew nothing about it, of course; luckily, I didn't read it before her.

Thank God for that at least! I read it in my room and she knows nothing as yet. I thought at once of you, my old friend. The situation is appalling. I must have some one to help me through it; an adviser, an expert! I said to myself; 'There must be a screw loose somewhere; this letter may be out of order, but how can I find out? How am I to get out of the difficulty?' "

The Councillor sat thinking. A herd of cows was moving down the street towards the market place; their lowing and the shuffling footsteps of the drovers could be heard through the window.

"I sincerely hope," began Monsieur Lamarzellière impressively, "that you do not intend to hold yourself responsible for the debt."

He was well aware of the weakness of the des Lourdines on any point of honour.

"To hold myself responsible!" repeated Monsieur des Lourdines, startled.

The magistrate knew his man, or rather he thought, in the superficial way men have of judging each other, that he knew him. He made up his mind immediately: his cue was to speak authoritatively and stiffen up the poor weakling who was so pitiably unable to fight his own battle.

He therefore sat down ponderously, in the official seat, whence he felt best able to dominate the situation.

"Calm yourself, des Lourdines, I repeat, and let us review the situation dispassionately."

"Yes, yes, by all means, Lamarzellière, clearly and dispassionately."

"Listen!" continued the Councillor, in his cold, judicial, slightly nasal tones; "I am a childless bachelor. Were I the father of a son, I should have brought him up in handcuffs, metaphorically speaking; for I look upon constraint as the primary principle of rational education. I am aware that we differ on that point. I will therefore not touch upon the sentimental side of the question, nor will I give my view as to the moral obligation of your son with regard to the liabilities he has incurred. But since you desire my legal opinion, here it is:" (here he blew his nose importantly).

"In this matter, three alternatives present themselves for our consideration: either the debt does not exist at all; or, it stands good in its entirety; or it has been fraudulently increased. We may, I think, dismiss the two first as highly improbable, or at any rate quite easy to deal with. Passing to the third: this

Müller must be some back-street money-lender who sees in your son's fine prospects a chance of obtaining interest out of all proportion to the sums lent, that is to say, interest usurious to such a degree as not to be recoverable by law."

"Exactly, exactly, that is what I thought!" put in Monsieur des Lourdines, gazing pleadingly at the magistrate.

Monsieur Lamarzellière continued: "We may even find that this money-lender, this usurer, has, on some previous occasion, brought himself within reach of the law. This is of course mere hypothesis, but it is worth verifying, and such an inquiry can be conducted with the greatest ease by any business man, your solicitor for instance. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly!" replied Monsieur des Lourdines, his face clearing.

"Very well. When the inquiry is complete, if the result should be as I imagine, there could naturally be no question of payment in full. But even then there would still remain a considerable debt to be discharged. This brings us back to the question I put to you first: do you, or do you not, intend to pay?"

The relief which had momentarily illu-

mined Monsieur des Lourdines' countenance disappeared instantly; his eyes clouded, his arms fell heavily to his sides.

"How can I tell!" he groaned. "What can I say! You tell me there will in any case be something considerable to pay. If I refuse, where is Anthime to get the money? After all he is my son—God in heaven, what am I to do!"

Monsieur Lamarzellière began to show signs of impatience. He shrugged his shoulders and moistened his lips.

"This is waste of time—pure nonsense," he drawled. "Let me speak frankly as a lawyer, and recall to you that a principle is involved in this, besides the sentimental aspect of the case. Listen! Let us admit that the original debt has been incurred. If it can be proved that the money-lender has imposed scandalously usurious interest, you, by paying in full, *ipso facto* condone his fraud, and I say you have no right to do so."

"But . . . but . . ." stammered Monsieur des Lourdines . . . "does not the question of honour equally occur?"

"Honour, forsooth! my good fellow, that much-misapplied term *honour* forbids you to commit a quixotic action which becomes a

precedent and threatens to involve other parents in difficulties identical with your own! Honour forbids you to pander to your parental self-indulgence, by encouraging this odious form of making capital out of the follies of youth. Honour . . ."

"But, Lamarzellière, there is such a thing as prison! 'Anthime shall not go to prison—I tell you, rather than that should happen . . ." speech failed the wretched man. He was silent. The Councillor stared and his eyes said more plainly than words: "What is one to do with a fatuous idiot like this!"

"Prison!" he echoed. "Imprisonment for debt does not involve disgrace. Moreover the prison doors are not so readily opened as you seem to think. Money-lenders know full well that in dealing with parents the threat of imprisonment produces excellent results. Besides," he pulled a heavy volume out of the book-case behind him and turned over its leaves as he spoke, "there are laws. Here we are, here is your boy's case: imprisonment for debt can only be imposed where stel-li-o-nate can be proved." He rolled the long word on his tongue.

"Stellionate?" repeated Monsieur des Lourdines, looking scared out of his wits.

"Yes."

The Councillor looked up.

"The expression *stellionate,* my dear fellow, is derived from a Latin word, stellio, a poisonous lizard thus named by the Romans on account of the star-shaped spots on its back. Jurisconsults have bestowed upon fraudulent —there, there . . . a complete explanation would carry us too far from the case in point. *Stellionate* can be pleaded where, for instance, the furniture of a house is sold or pledged by one who is not its absolute proprietor. Now it is to the last degree improbable that your son should have so deceived a professional money-lender as to induce him to accept a mortgage on Petit-Fougeray!"

"I suppose so," sighed Monsieur des Lourdines.

"Now, in commercial law, on the other hand," pursued the Magistrate, turning over the leaves of the book rapidly, "Article I. of the Code of 1832, enjoins imprisonment for commercial debt. Your son is not a trader, ergo . . .

"And now, old man, there is a further point you do not seem to have considered as yet. What would you have left to live upon, if you paid away twenty-four thousand pounds?

That has to be thought of. How could you manage? It would surely spell ruin! Is your wife in a fit state to bear such a calamity? I personally do not think so. You would be absolutely ruined, and she—well, she might —you must face it, my boy—it might kill her, eh? What?"

"It would kill her if Anthime went to prison," Monsieur des Lourdines persisted drearily. He seemed crushed under the weight of his misfortune.

They argued for a long time.

At length Monsieur Lamarzellière grew weary.

"Look here!" he exclaimed in tones which warned his hearer that he was making his ultimate declaration: "If you utterly refuse, as I strongly advise, to be responsible for your son's debts, and if he has to go to prison in consequence, it will no doubt be a great sorrow to you, des Lourdines, and I sympathize deeply with you; still, my conscience bids me tell you that, since your son has chosen to sow the wind, you should let him reap the whirlwind: therein alone lie justice and equity."

Monsieur des Lourdines rose slowly. His friend's words seemed to have inflicted a mortal wound.

"Justice! Equity!" he murmured in trembling tones. "Oh, Lamarzellière, you have indeed opened my eyes! Anthime, poor Anthime, is my son. Who can say that all that has happened is not the fault of his training, of his parents?"

He bowed his head on his hands and his lips quivered.

Monsieur Lamarzellière made an involuntary gesture such as Pilate may have used when he asked the great question which has never yet received an answer; he ran his fingers idly through the leaves of the law-book, but made no sound.

A neighbouring Convent bell began to toll.

Monsieur des Lourdines walked towards the door without raising his eyes.

"Won't you stay to lunch, my dear old boy? Stay and have some food; it will do you good."

"No thank you, I couldn't."

The Magistrate tried to persuade him, but elicited only a jerky refusal, and this sentence muttered in heart-broken tones: "I must be alone!"

At the threshold, Lamarzellière whispered, "Courage!" with a kindly tap on the shoulder of the stricken man. Des Lourdines looked up but his stiffened lips could frame no word.

He walked up the street and found himself again in the midst of the market.

He had gone to the Councillor with complete faith in his ability to save the situation. He had been confident that the man of law would see his way through the tangle, and prescribe some definite course of action; now he felt lost, solitary, helpless. But at least his mind was made up. Lamarzellière's pompous periods had contained a hint which sent him flying to his solicitor, Maître Paillaud.

His way lay across the central square of the cattle fair. It was densely crowded and he found it difficult to force a passage for himself. Presently his eye fell upon a familiar figure; a wrinkled, sunburnt neck, angular shoulders clad in a light blue blouse, legs all bowed and twisted: Célestin!

Célestin was prodding the sides of a milch cow; in his hand he held the scissors with which he would presently cut a mark in the animal's coat, if he concluded the deal.

Monsieur des Lourdines caught at his blouse.

"Holy Virgin!" exclaimed Célestin, startled at the sight of his master whom he supposed to be some thirty miles away.

"Célestin, don't buy that cow!"

"But, Master, why not?" questioned Célestin, opening wide his dog-like eyes. "I shall not find a grander milker anywhere; there is nothing better in the market to-day!"

"I mean, don't buy that one or any other —not to-day, anyhow. I've been thinking it over. No, we won't buy!"

He moved away and was speedily swallowed up in the crowd, leaving Célestin gazing after him open-mouthed.

There were a great many people in the solicitor's waiting-room, as was usual on market days. Monsieur des Lourdines squeezed himself into a little space on a bench between two countrymen and awaited his turn. His neighbours chewed tobacco and stared at the strange little gentleman who muttered to himself and sighed.

A clerk, passing through, recognized him and offered to hear his business at once, in a private corner of the room; but Monsieur des Lourdines preferred to consult kindly old Maître Paillaud, the family solicitor, in person. He had been so suddenly roused from his painful réverie that he stammered and repeated over and over again: "Monsieur le Notaire . . . Monsieur le Notaire . . ." in

such strange tones that the young man looked at him in astonishment.

"Very good, sir," he said at length, "I will let him know at once that you are here."

A moment later, Maître Paillaud put his head in at the door, singled out Monsieur des Lourdines, and said with a pleasant smile:

"Will you come this way please, Monsieur des Lourdines."

They shook hands.

Maître Paillaud was a little, fat, bald man, with snow-white skin. A velvet skull-cap with a long tassel framed his knobby forehead, and his pince-nez, shielding a pair of searching brown eyes, quivered like antennæ with each of his nervous gestures.

At the opening words of his client, his mouth rounded itself into an astonished "Oh!" Being hard of hearing he alternately bent his ear towards his interlocutor, then turned quickly to scrutinize his face and try to discover whether by any chance—could the poor gentleman be—? twenty-four thousand pounds! His tongue refused its office. He forgot to ask his client to be seated; he stood aghast, twisting his quill pen round and round in his fingers. The old story, alas! Why must all the good old country-stock ruin it-

self, and go under in this idiotic fashion? He felt outraged at the thought of so much money going out of the district!

Now at last Monsieur des Lourdines was expressing himself firmly and lucidly. Maître Paillaud listened dumbly and made no sign beyond occasionally wringing his hands.

After he had taken down the name and address of the money-lender he broke out: "Good Heavens! Is it possible! I can hardly believe it! Who could have supposed . . ." he snatched his cap from his head, as if about to hurl it to the floor; his naked cranium gleamed like a billiard-ball.

"I am absolutely astounded! astounded! I am grieved from the bottom of my heart, sir!"

Monsieur des Lourdines grasped his hand convulsively.

"I will proceed with the inquiry immediately, and I sincerely hope we shall get off with only a nasty fright! But, sir, in the deplorable event . . . it might be, you know, that . . . pray forgive me, dear sir, and believe that the question I ought to ask is dictated by . . . by the profound interest I feel in your distinguished family . . . an old servant, you know . . ."

In strangled tones, Monsieur des Lourdines replied slowly:

"I should pay, Maître Paillaud!"

The solicitor gazed at him with a mingled expression of respect, and pity. Timidly he objected:

"But would you sell the farms? Sir, reflect! Pause, I beg of you! Remember that . . ."

Monsieur des Lourdines shook his head wearily and took up his hat. Maître Paillaud escorted him to the top of the stairs and stood, cap in hand, watching him descend, and murmuring in broken accents: "My devotion . . . Sir, let me assure you . . ."

At the "Plat d'étain" Monsieur des Lourdines sat in a retired corner and tried to eat, but could only swallow a few mouthfuls; Monsieur Bricart left him in peace but watched him curiously from a distance.

When he had finished his meal he went upstairs and locked himself into his narrow little room with its one window draped with calico curtains. It was cold and damp. He had been asked whether he would have a fire lighted, but had declined.

When he found himself alone at last, for

the first time since he had received the fateful letter, a kind of panic seized him; he looked apprehensively at the unfamiliar white-washed walls, within which he must remain prisoned for the next few hours, unsolaced by friendship, alone with his torment, far from his beloved Fougeray.

He stood motionless, staring out of the window with glazed blue eyes: "Pity me, oh my God! Pity me!" Thoughts wandered disconnectedly through his brain. He could hear again the words of his advisers, words so impotent alas, to help or instruct.

The distant buzz of the market-place, the cackle of poultry, the pawing of horses standing in the courtyard below, rose muffled to his ears through the closed window. He listened dully to the mixture of human and animal sounds. The poignant emotions he had passed through in the last twenty hours, coupled with a sleepless night and almost complete abstention from food, had thoroughly exhausted him. By degrees his limbs relaxed, and sitting in a large armchair he fell into a heavy slumber.

* * * * *

In his dream he saw a huge monster, golden as the sun, reclining on a gigantic spider's

web of gleaming ropes. Terror paralyzed his limbs when Anthime appeared and walked blindly forward, stumbling against the obstacle. The monster stirred, unfolded horrific, scaly tentacles from beneath its belly, seized Anthime and climbing swiftly up the luminous web, disappeared into darkness with its prey.

He opened his eyes.

"Anthime!" he groaned. "God! Where am I!"

With beating heart he turned his thoughts to the author of all this misery. Why was he not present! He would have loosed the vials of his wrath upon his offending head, would have relieved his soul by reviling him as an unnatural son, an infamous wastrel, a heartless brute. Faintness came over him and clouded his brain; he felt far away, forlorn; everything faded from him, he could no longer picture his son's features. This was the end then! All was over!

"It must be our fault. Surely, surely we are to blame as well!"

He was choking. He must get out of this horrible room.

He ran downstairs, and rushing through the mob outside, made his way by devious

side-streets into the open country. The evening air cooled his heated brain; a soft drizzle moistened his cheek with a touch like a caress.

He tramped at a steady pace along the muddy yellow road, where, as a boy, he had trudged with his schoolfellows on Sundays. He did not recognize the old landmarks; he only felt that he must walk, walk, walk away into the far distance, for ever and ever.

Gusts of wind swirled in the ample folds of his driving cloak and whistled across the vast spaces of red ploughland so like that of his property at Fouchaut, which must now go to the hammer. He forged on, hat in hand. Not a soul was about. He was alone. Far ahead a curtain of tall poplars lost itself in a background of gloom and murk. He was practically oblivious of his surroundings, of time, of his own personality. He walked mechanically, urged by the powerful West wind, soaked through by fine falling rain . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE buggy seemed to have been rolling along the high-road for hours and hours. The lamps were alight and their glow shone yellow on the hedges and puddles.

A very late start had been made, so that instead of reaching Petit-Fougeray in the morning, as usual, the travellers could not arrive before nightfall. First of all Frédéric made several mistakes in his errands for his mistress and was obliged to repair them; then he found that the mare required shoeing; later, he discovered the absence of his master and wasted valuable time looking for him while Monsieur des Lourdines was himself hunting high and low for Suire the miller. He tried the Court-house, the clerk's office, the public-houses, and every imaginable place; for at the last moment a disquieting thought had presented itself to his weary brain: what could he possibly tell his wife about the miller's law-suit? He had made it

the excuse for his sudden journey to Poitiers, and now he could neither run the man to ground, nor find anyone to tell him how the case had been decided!

Another point troubled him: how was he to explain his prohibition to Célestin, the day before, with regard to the cow? Would his wife suspect something? It was a deplorable tangle and made it very difficult for him to carry out his determination not to tell her the truth about Anthime. His mind was, however, made up on that point: until the result of the inquiry concerning the money-lender should come to hand, he would take every means to safeguard the few remaining hours of peace it might be the lot of his poor Émilie to enjoy.

He had been afraid Célestin might get back before him and give his own account of what had happened; but he had just passed him on the road, jogging home in the empty cart.

Master and man drove in silence, as usual. They had left the flat country behind and had now reached their own district with its long slow climbs up the hills, and the stilted trots down. It still drizzled, as it had been doing ever since the night before.

Monsieur des Lourdines lay back suffering

dully; he was tired out. The monotonous rolling of the wheels might have lulled him to blessed oblivion, but for the anguish of his soul, the aching of his limbs, the smarting of his eyelids from unwonted tears and loss of sleep.

He roused himself slightly at sight of a light in a distant building. The gloom under the trees thickened; the break creaked; they were descending the Crêneraie hill. They skirted the park pailings and turned to the left up the avenue, bowling over the short turf—the jolting of the springs was the only sound to be heard. Lights shone in Madame des Lourdines' sitting-room.

"Courage! Courage!" he muttered weakly under his breath. The magistrate's last words seemed to beat into his brain: "Courage!"

He got out of the buggy and stood with his back to the front door, stretching up to Frédéric for the parcels. He wanted to fill his arms with them; they would distract Emilie's attention.

The muddy wheels swayed as the mare shook herself.

Monsieur des Lourdines did not speak for a moment. He was dazzled by the light of the lantern Perrine held before his face.

"How is Madame?" he queried at last.

"No change, Master, no change. She was beginning to fret for your arrival! You are very late, Master!"

"Pretty late, pretty late, Perrine. The mare had to be shod, and one thing and another, so we are a little late—just a little late."

He went up the staircase, sighing: "Late! Yes, indeed, we are late!"

She had heard his voice and was awaiting him at the threshold of her apartment leaning against the door to steady herself. When she saw him, she turned and preceded him, swaying slowly into the room; then she faced him.

A wood fire diffused a pleasant warmth.

"Well, you haven't hurried yourself! What on earth have you been doing?"

"Well, you see, Émilie . . . Ouf, I am out of breath—I must have come upstairs too quickly. You see—well, Frédéric made some stupid mistakes over your purchases; and, just as we were starting, the mare cast a shoe.

Never mind—we are home at last, and here are your parcels: knitting-wool, I think; no, this is the package from the chemist."

"I was getting quite anxious. Bring that here, please," she sat down at the table. "What is all this about a law-suit of Suire's? You are too good to those people, Timothée; you let them impose upon you. What is the case about?"

He took off his driving cloak.

"It is hot in this room!"

He spread the cloak over a chair in front of the fire to dry.

Then in a voice which would quiver against his will, he told the story of the quarry and the claim Pagis was making. He paced backwards and forwards, horribly uneasy, trying to avoid his wife's eye.

"A mortgage!" she exclaimed, pushing aside the parcel she was unpacking.

"But where do you come in, Timothée? What could you give evidence about?"

"Evidence?" stammered Monsieur des Lourdines, flushing slightly—"well, dear, it was not exactly my evidence he wanted; it was more moral support. How can I explain . . . my attendance on his behalf was

a sort of guarantee of his respectability, don't you see? It is difficult to put these things into words—can't you understand?"

"Of course I can. Did he win?"

"Did he win? That's just the point . . . it is not very easy to say . . ."

When the momentous question was put by his wife, her eye compelling his, every word of his trumped-up explanation flew out of his head. He gasped. He very nearly blurted out the truth. He knew he looked absurd, and that his voice and gestures were forced and unconvincing.

"Well?" she asked again, looking at him with a puzzled expression.

"Really, Émilie, I can't tell you. I did not stay to hear the end. I just said what was necessary and came away. You have no idea how puzzling legal terms are. I can make neither head nor tail of them."

She made no reply to this, and he began to breathe more freely.

"What time did you start for Poitiers?"

"When? On Monday? At four in the morning, Émilie."

"That was very early! But where did you spend the first part of the night?"

"Where?"

"Yes . . . where? You did not sleep in your bed here; it had not been touched."

This was the last straw. He stammered, blushed and looked embarrassed. She told him he was behaving like a fool—then she continued:

"But, Timothée, come nearer the lamp. I thought I was not mistaken. For a moment I imagined it might be a trick of the light, but it is not. What is the matter with you? You look ill."

"Nothing, nothing, Émilie. On my honour there is nothing the matter."

"But you are looking ghastly!"

"I am not ill, only just tired. It is quite a journey, you know."

"If you are really not ill, all right; but you certainly do not look yourself."

She desisted, and her thoughts began to stray, and her fingers to fidget.

"What a long time Frédéric is. I want him to go over his accounts with me—and Célestin. Did you see anything of him, Timothée, or was he back before you?"

"Oh, about Célestin!" exclaimed Monsieur des Lourdines, shutting his eyes and riding blindly at the fence: "I saw him at the cat-

tle fair. I have thought over that matter of the cow again and decided that we can carry on a bit longer with Blondine and Rousseaude."

"What!" ejaculated Madame des Lourdines angrily, half rising from her chair.

He repeated his last sentence, though with perceptibly diminished assurance.

"So Célestine has not bought a cow?"

"I may have been wrong, my dear, but—"

She pulled her book-rest violently towards her.

"How dared you!" she thundered, glaring at him.

"Last year we found two cows ample, you know, Emilie," he ventured to reply.

"Indeed! So we may have, last year. But now Rosseaude has her calf to suckle, and we cannot take all her milk. The winter is coming on and we shall have workmen and day-labourers to feed. How am I to do it? The whole thing had been settled. It is too bad! You are perfectly impossible!"

The colour mounted to her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled excitedly as she watched her husband pace up and down the room.

"Quite true!" Monsieur des Lourdines began to waver and lose his head. "Still, I do

think we might make two cows do. Perhaps we could get rid of the calf. We might sell it next market day."

"Timothée, you are crazy! Sell the calf! What difference would that make—besides, we agreed to rear it! This is really beyond everything. For goodness' sake, Timothée, pull yourself together. What on earth is the matter with you?"

Frédéric appeared at the half-open door, an account book in hand. Madame des Lourdines turned her head gloomily and made him a sign to enter.

"Timothée, you have hung your cloak to dry in front of my fire. The smell is very disagreeable."

Monsieur des Lourdines saw his opportunity when Frédéric began to speak, seized the garment and hastily made his escape.

Inexpressibly grateful to his frayed nerves was the silence of his own room. He locked the door, thankfully welcoming the promise of the long solitary hours of the night. No sound reached him but the soughing of the wind in the trees.

His violin lay on the bed. The sight surprised him. Why was it not on top of the wardrobe as usual? He must have forgotten

to put it away the other night. Everything was hazy in his mind—the violin was his one friend—year in and year out they had sung, dreamt, wailed together, but that was in the old, old days . . . the good days that were over for him. A heavy curtain had fallen and separated the happy years that would come no more, from the wretchedness spread before him in the future. Something seemed to snap in his brain. He knelt at his bedside, laid his head on his violin, and fell to helpless weeping.

CHAPTER VII

FOR some days nothing transpired at Petit-Fougeray. The secret was well guarded, no suspicion was aroused. Yet a curious silence brooded over the place; the very cows seemed to low in hushed tones, the dogs to bark more gently. The master was out all day and only returned late at night, taciturn, and covered with mud from head to foot; he might almost have been lying on the damp earth, or wallowing in the furrows of the ploughed land. Shadows, which the glow of the lamps availed not to lighten, lay heavy upon his brow.

He was always on the watch at post time. He seized the letters eagerly and tore open the envelopes with trembling fingers.

Though no news had yet reached him from Maître Paillaud, he sat down daily and wrote to Anthime. Each day he warned him that the half-yearly allowance of two hundred and fifty pounds he had paid into his account a month ago would, in all probability, be the

last he could afford to send him. He filled pages and pages with cramped writing, crossed and re-crossed and covered with blots, and every night he threw them into the fire. The next morning he would begin all over . . . but always the letter was either too long or too short or too stern or too gentle. He wished to curse, but could not bring himself to do so; longed to forgive, yet hesitated; his sense of justice was outraged, but his heart over-indulgent—hitherto the latter had won the day, and the letter had been torn up in disgust and flung into the fire. Thus the days and nights succeeded each other.

He yearned for a friend to whom he might confide his trouble, for the weight of it, borne alone, was like to crush him. Sometimes he cried his tale aloud, in the woods. But such out-pourings brought no relief; he needed a sympathetic ear, the pressure of a kindly arm passed through his own.

One morning Célestin fetched him to inspect some damage on the property. A sluice had given way in one of the irrigation canals of a meadow. The day was hopelessly gloomy, earth and sky alike were grey, inexorably sad. Quite suddenly his heart failed him utterly—he felt he could bear no more.

The honest countryman trudging along in front of him was a trusty servant. An irresistible impulse impelled him to appeal to his devotion. He cried out: "Célestin!" and stood still.

The man turned and saw his master gazing at him with anguished eyes.

"Oh, Célestin!"

That was all. But when the two men moved on, the master's hand rested on the faithful fellow's shoulder.

At last Maître Paillaud's answer arrived.

It covered six large sheets of paper. The debt of twenty-four thousand pounds was, he regretted to say, secured by promissory notes correctly drawn up and signed. As the only interest mentioned in these was five per cent., and the profit of the money-lender was evidently merged in the net amount of the loan there was no possibility of making out a case to go before a Court of Law.

Moreover the lender had cunningly safeguarded himself by making Anthime borrow in the guise of a trader; in order to obtain the protection afforded by commercial legislation, Anthime had been induced to declare in writing that he required the money for the development of some racing stables, of which

he admitted himself to be the owner. Maître Paillaud had duly made inquiries: the racing-stables did not exist, as such; but Anthime had two horses in training, one of which was a stallion, at an establishment in Seine-et-Oise. It might yet be possible to contest the legality of his claim to be in business.

The letter was a frightful blow to the unhappy parent. The words of the magistrate recurred to his memory: "There is a law which prescribes in general terms, imprisonment for commercial debt." He was terrified. His mind, unhinged by suspense and solitude, pictured Anthime in convict dress, sitting in a cell, eating bread and water. Nothing milder occurred to him. Prison was a place of shame and ignominy to which no father could possibly allow his son to be relegated until he had done everything in his power to save him. His flesh crept on his bones at the bare thought of a convict's uniform!

He flew to his desk and wrote hastily to Maître Paillaud: "Sell everything! Get rid of all the farms!" He added words of uncontrolled grief and poured into the letter all the pain and misery to which he had so long denied expression.

At length he grew calmer.

"My property at Fouchaut," he added, "is very valuable. It should sell well. Lorgerie, le Purdeau, la Contrie, la Bernegoue are all in excellent condition and will also attract purchasers. We should expect at least sixteen thousand pounds for them. You may sell the Marais farms at a loss, if necessary, but we must save Charvinière. I cannot let that go."

Relief came to him after he had posted the letter. He felt the importance of maintaining self-control while such pressing duties required his attention; he must realize the necessary capital with the least possible loss, and above all he must use discretion and tact in breaking the news to his unfortunate wife, who was as yet in complete ignorance of the blow about to fall.

He himself was already somewhat inured to the idea. Trouble carries with it the strength to endure. His soul should rise above misfortune. He would accept loss and disaster. No complaint should pass his lips so long as he could enjoy the blessed light of day, and the good gifts left over to him by a merciful Providence. But she, poor lady, petted and guarded as she had been, accus-

tomed to countless small luxuries and alleviations of her suffering condition, how should she bear wholesale calamity! How should she fail to be crushed, killed, ground down by this cruel stroke of fortune!

For one foolish moment he dreamt of keeping her in ignorance, of surrounding her with plots and counterplots to prevent her ever learning the truth. But such a plan was manifestly absurd. How would it be possible to conceal from her such a change of life as that involved by the loss of twenty-four thousand pounds!

They would have to retrench in every way, and lead a frugal, economical, modest existence.

The news must be broken gradually. She must be brought imperceptibly to the point when she would guess of her own accord.

The task was a difficult one to carry through, and he was sadly conscious of his own inadequacy. He therefore determined to summon to his aid her Confessor and her Doctor, both of whom must be accustomed in the execution of their duties, to such delicate functions. He wrote to both and begged them to come to the château with the least possible delay, on a matter concerning his

wife, which he would prefer to explain to them in person.

Frédéric delivered the letters in the village the same evening.

Madame des Lourdines had noticed that something was amiss with her husband ever since his journey to Poitiers. He was subtly changed, and was visibly losing flesh. She could discover no reason for this. She worried over the thought that some mortal disease might be beginning its insidious attack, and that she would presently be left alone. She imagined a thousand reasons, but never the right one. For there was nothing to point her suspicions towards financial loss. Landed property was not subject to the fluctuations which make city speculation so precarious. She therefore pondered in secret, conscious of vague fears, wondering uneasily whence danger threatened. Her husband's demeanour and depression perplexed her. When he came in from his walks abroad he declared he was fagged out, unequal to conversation; his clothes were invariably in the most dreadful condition; he no longer took the trouble to pull off his muddy boots before entering her room; he simply threw himself

down before the fire, with legs outstretched and chest sunk in, and remained perfectly silent; at intervals he would look sadly and tenderly at her.

All of a sudden she took fright on her own account. She thought her condition might have changed for the worse and that he was afraid to tell her she was in danger of death. Still, she dared not ask questions.

One thing reassured her. She noticed that for some time past her husband had devoted practically his whole attention to reducing the household expenses. He was quite determined on the matter. For instance when the conversation turned again on a subsequent occasion to the subject of a new cow, he represented gravely to her that twelve pounds was a considerable sum which he could not disburse without due consideration. She was very angry and thought him frankly ridiculous, but he would not give way. There were daily arguments concerning the thousand and one repairs needed at the beginning of the winter to keep a great house like Petit-Fougeray habitable and in working order: there were slates missing on the roof, the cow-shed required plastering; he had been obliged to transfer the cows to a wretched stable which

had practically no ventilation. The flooring of the hay-loft and the hen-house each clamoured for a bare half-day's work, but he would not give it; and the aggravating part was that, though he was the first to mention the need, he did so in such a way as to make it quite clear that he did not intend to do anything. She was exasperated.

The consideration that all these eccentricities might be merely the indication of advancing age, satisfied her at last that he was in no way troubled about her health, and in her selfish relief, her spirit rose aggressive.

"Timothée, what does all this mean? You must really explain yourself. The netting of the chicken-run is full of holes and you refuse to repair it. It isn't common-sense!"

He smiled absently at her but made no answer, for he was carrying out his idea of setting her brain to work, and bringing her to the point of guessing.

"You won't?" she repeated in tones almost threatening, for her temper was rising at her repeated failures to dominate where hitherto her will had been law. She was helpless before this barrier of smiles and gentleness. "Do you refuse?"

Monsieur des Lourdines nodded his head and sighed.

"On account of the expense?" she insisted, ironically.

"Yes."

She said no more, but looked intently at him. An idea came to her—a horrifying idea which seemed to offer a definite solution of the problem: Timothée's mind must be affected!

She turned very white; terror took possession of her, and with a sudden recollection that insane people must be humoured, she replied in quavering tones—

"I dare say you are right, Timothée. Perhaps it is better so. Yes, you are right."

It was his turn to stare. He looked at her in evident surprise.

That evening she sent for all the servants in turn and proceeded to question them, in mortal fright of hearing her suspicions confirmed. Perrine came first, and then Estelle. She asked them whether they had noticed anything odd about their master, anything unusual in his manner or speech.

"Tell me everything. Don't be afraid. You understand, I am sure, the sort of thing

I mean. I ask in his own interest, in fact in the interest of us all!"

The maids had certainly observed that for some time past their master had been unlike himself, but they could give no definite instance to support their impression except that Estelle had overheard him talking to himself in his own room.

"What did he say? Of course you listened. Quite right too! Come, let me hear! What did he talk about?"

"Madame, he said . . . he said . . . I don't know what he said . . ."

Frédéric scratched his head and opined that Monsieur must be very ill. He related in full the scene when his master came to wake him in the night looking perfectly ghastly, and ordered him to harness the mare at 3 A. M. "In the Russian campaign I saw men who had lain out in the snow all night, but Madame, I never saw one with such a deathly countenance as Master's."

She wrung her hands desperately.

"Good Heavens! And did he speak during the drive, Frédéric?"

"Not a word, Madame. He generally chats all the way, but that day I am sure he must have been feeling very bad."

"And on the way back?"

"Never a word."

Célestin said his master had come up to him in the market-place "looking very queer," and that quite lately when they were walking together in the meadow, he had called out "Célestin!" and said nothing more, but looked as if he was on the verge of tears.

She sent them all away. "God help us!" she groaned, and decided to send for the doctor.

The next day, about three o'clock, she was finishing a note to Doctor Lancier, when she heard the sound of wheels in the courtyard. "Dear, dear, I do hope it is not a visitor," she muttered.

Estelle ran up and announced that the doctor was below.

"The doctor! Did you say the doctor? Are you sure? This is providential. Run quick and ask him to come up. Say I am waiting. Go on, be quick, child . . ."

"But, Madame, he is talking to Monsieur in the garden."

"Talking to Monsieur in the garden? Well, better so, perhaps. The doctor is sure to notice anything odd. How curious that I

should have guessed. Good Heavens, what a calamity! Estelle, beat up those cushions. Draw the curtains further back—there, there, that will do. You can go, but leave the door open."

Her hypothesis of the insanity of her husband had grown in the course of a few hours to positive certainty.

She sat with clasped hands, feverishly alive to every sound. The doctor was very long in coming up. At last she heard his footstep on the stairs. He was alone.

The moment she caught sight of him approaching slowly, with bent head, rubbing his hands absently, she said to herself: "He has noticed something!"

The doctor paused a moment at the door, ruffling up with his fingers the locks of hair which the pressure of his hat had caused to adhere too closely to his hot forehead. He was a bright-complexioned, well-preserved old man, looking in his long redingote as if he had stepped out of a Molière play. His large gentle blue eyes habitually watered a little behind his glasses. He was wiping them now, as he stood in the doorway.

"May I come in, dear lady?"

She nodded, trying to smile. "Yes, yes, please do."

His glasses flashed in the light.

"I know I was not expected to-day, but I thought I would just look in," he said pleasantly as he picked his way daintily across the room. He pursed his lips and looked anxiously at a spot on the back of his hand. "I had a few visits to pay in the near neighbourhood, so it occurred to me I might inquire after your health. Have I done wrong, Madame?"

He sat down.

"On the contrary, Doctor, it is too kind of you. I am delighted to see you . . . in fact . . . " She halted in her speech. He looked as if something had happened, and the very sound of his voice gave her a presentiment that he was about to broach the subject of her husband.

He proceeded first of all with his usual examination, pulled out his watch and felt her pulse, listened to heart and chest.

"Quite satisfactory," he pronounced, putting his stethoscope back into his hat. "As regards your condition, everything is as I should wish; still . . ."

As he sat facing her, his raised eyebrows

made a straight black line across his forehead, and he gazed moodily into her countenance, cracking his finger-joints the while.

"Still, the bad weather is coming on, dear lady. You must neglect no precaution; more especially, being of a somewhat nervous temperament, you must guard against worry or anticipation of trouble—of course we all have our share of difficulties, and we manage to win through somehow. Man, dearest lady, is, so to speak, a battlefield upon which two forces are incessantly at war: reason, and the nerves! Allow reason to be the victor! To come down to the personal application of my little sermon, you are I believe in sufficiently good health to withstand a mental shock—even a severe one, eh?"

"Doctor!" she interrupted in a strangled voice: she guessed that he was endeavouring to prepare her for bad news.

He continued however without seeming to notice her exclamation.

"Therefore self-confidence and serenity, dear friend, are the supreme counsel of wisdom and science. You quite understand?"

"Doctor!" she cried again, fixing glittering eyes on the old man, "you saw my hus-

band just now—you have been talking to him!"

Her tones expressed such poignant distress that the doctor was struck dumb for a moment. Then he continued impressively—

"That is so. I have been talking to Monsieur des Lourdines."

"What did he say to you?"

"Come, come, dear lady, many subjects were touched upon. It is difficult to give an accurate report. Monsieur des Lourdines did me the honour of confiding certain business matters to me."

"Did his manner strike you as peculiar in any way? or his speech?"

"I don't quite understand you. I noticed nothing in particular."

"You won't tell me! Yet I feel sure you have seen it, but perhaps you are not quite certain. Do, for God's sake, tell me the truth!"

Both fell silent. Then, quite suddenly, she burst into tears.

"Doctor, Doctor, I am so wretched! He has frightened me so lately—"

She broke into an agitated narrative of all the recent happenings: of his departure in the middle of the night, his strange demean-

our, his suddenly developed mania for economy.

"And, since that unhappy market day," she whimpered, "he stays much longer than usual with me in the evenings—he sits in the chimney corner and says never a word, and looks ghastly. I wondered and wondered what could be the matter—and then yesterday . . . all of a sudden . . . I guessed! I daren't put it into words, it is so awful! I believe his mind is affected—do you know what I mean? I fear . . ."

She sobbed bitterly.

Dr. Lancier watched her silently. When she raised her tear-stained eyes to his, he rose and came towards her. "What in the world am I to say?" he murmured under his breath.

He bent over her, resting his hands on the table in a purposely confidential attitude peculiarly impressive under the circumstances.

"Madame, I will stake my professional reputation on the perfect stability of Monsieur des Lourdines' mind," he pronounced firmly, slowly, gravely. "Monsieur des Lourdines is absolutely sane."

The verdict so solemnly given should have reassured her, but a cold shiver ran down her back. She stared dumbly into his face. For

now another fear forced itself upon her; a vague, unnamed terror of something, she knew not what, something that showed itself in his eyes: certainly he knew of some cause for uneasiness or distress.

His final counsel reached her ears, but not her understanding; she uttered a few feeble words in response to his leave-taking and watched him depart as if in a dream.

The next day another visitor was announced: Father Placide arrived in the afternoon. The worthy priest had been her confessor for ten years. He was a portly, jovial-looking man, fond of an occasional glass of sound wine, and not averse to a gossip with Monsieur des Lourdines over the grapes and walnuts. On this particular day, Monsieur des Lourdines was watching for him, and they had a lengthened conversation in the garden. Madame des Lourdines saw them and despatched Estelle on some trivial errand, to try and overhear the subject of their talk. But they saw her coming and moved away.

At last, Father Placide came up. He was alone.

He was a Capuchin, with huge sandalled feet and a heavy beard.

Madame des Lourdines invited him to sit near her and asked the news of the parish. He replied in a constrained manner, and she noticed the worried expression of his face as he tugged at his beard.

He made the same excuse as the doctor, for visiting her without being summoned. He had been walking in the vicinity. She offered some refreshment, and he refused with a marked air of self-denial. He talked to her on sacred subjects, exhorted her to calmness, patience, and resignation, in the terms he had used so often before; he perceived that custom had deprived them of their full effect, so he brought in a few quotations from the Imitation, reminding her that affliction is advantageous to the soul, and that the affections must not be centred on the things of this world.

He spoke at some length, getting nearer and nearer to his subject, and striving to arm her for the shock he must presently administer.

"God has hitherto endowed you plentifully with wealth, my dear Sister. He might presently see fit to deprive you of it; but the advantages of this world are as nothing; when God in His infinite wisdom takes them from us,

He thereby delivers us from possible occasion of sin."

His speech was punctuated by heavy sighs which made his beard tremble.

At his words she began, like yesterday, to apprehend some danger, to feel that some peril was coming nearer, was tightening its grasp upon her, seeking to crush her.

Again, she was seized with terror!

"Father, Father, I am afraid!"

The monk straightened his broad back. He drew from his capacious pocket a little medal and handed it to her.

"I have been thinking much of you, my dear Sister," he said. "Take this, and when you retire to-night, hang it around your neck. Pray—pray—pray—much and often!"

The same evening at the usual hour, Monsieur des Lourdines came and sat himself down near the fire. He seemed exhausted. He lay hunched up in the big chair, his head resting on the cushion, his legs, in their muddy top boots, extended to the warmth. The lamps had not been lighted. Husband and wife sat wrapped in thought, neither suggesting that the growing darkness should be dispelled.

It was the dreamy hour of the dying day, when the window glimmers blue against the fading sky, when the only brilliant point in the slumberous surroundings is some brass handle, or candlestick, reflecting the firelight. A belated bee buzzed, seeking honey in the deceptive roses of the chintz curtain. Outside, the green of the grass and trees slowly deepened to black; a blackbird piped in the bushes below, as it shook the damp leaves from its raven wings.

Madame des Lourdines sat motionless, invisible in her corner.

"Timothée," she ventured presently, "Bourasseau, the timber merchant, came this evening to tender for the elm we pulled down. You were out. I did not accept his offer."

"That was a mistake, Émilie."

"But why? Winter is coming on, and we have not a very large store of wood."

A pause.

"We are more in need of cash than firewood."

Another pause.

"Of cash?" repeated Madame des Lourdines, presently, in faint tones.

"Yes, my dear."

Again they sat silent.

"Timothée!" she burst out suddenly, "what is the meaning of all this? There is some mystery. You are concealing something from me. I know, I feel, there is disaster in the air! Is it a question of money? Timothée, you must tell me!"

Her teeth chattered.

He could not reply, for his lips quivered and he was not master of his voice.

"We must have had losses! Tell me! for pity's sake let me know everything! Surely, surely, things cannot be so bad as you seem to think!"

Still he answered nothing. He longed to speak, but could not find words. He left his chair and moved nearer to her.

When she saw him coming, she threw out her arms, as if to ward him off. "Not ruined, Timothée? . . ."

"No; no dear!" he cried, seizing her icy hands and striving to warm them in his breast; "we are not ruined, but listen, listen, Émilie, my dearest . . ."

"We *are* ruined! I know it! I feel it! I *will* know! I can be brave," she persisted, struggling to disengage herself from his grasp.

"No," he repeated; but his tone was not convincing: it was gloomy and wretched.

"What then?" she panted.

She had risen and they now stood face to face, but the room was so dark that they could not distinguish each other's features.

"For God's sake, let me speak, Émilie! be calm!"

"Ah . . ." she moaned feebly, her momentary strength suddenly deserting her; her gaze travelled beyond him and appeared to rest upon an object invisible to him: "Anthime!" she breathed.

Des Lourdines remained silent, but his hold upon her flaccid fingers tightened.

"Anthime!" she shrieked, heart-brokenly. "It is Anthime! I know it! Oh, my God!"

And she fell heavily to the ground.

When the servants rushed in, scared by the frantic pealing of the bell, they could but loosen her clothing and carry her to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE heat of the room was stifling. A fire had been burning there night and day for the last fortnight. In a corner near the glimmering night-light, a Sister of Charity sat with Perrine and Estelle, reciting the Rosary. At short intervals the nun rose and renewed the cooling compresses on the brow of the sick woman.

Earlier in the afternoon the parish priest had administered the Last Sacraments. There was no further hope of recovery. The stroke, on that fatal afternoon, had involved the whole body and all the faculties in total paralysis. As Perrine sobbingly declared, her poor mistress was a living corpse lying as one crucified on the bed.

The hands of the clock indicated the hour of nine. The striking part had been silenced.

Out of doors a gale shook the trees and rattled the windows. Rain and hail dashed against the window-panes and chased each other down the glass; the women listened fear-

fully to the shriek of the wind in the chimney, while their lips murmured: "Blessed art Thou amongst women, and blessed . . ."

Monsieur des Lourdines could not be induced to leave the bedside. The past weeks had made an old man of him. Vainly the doctor urged him to spare himself and take rest; advice availed nothing. In the torment and turmoil of his mind, he had become convinced that he was guilty of his wife's death; remorse ravaged him and gnawed at the small amount of vitality left within him.

He lay, crushed and broken, pressing his brow into the pillow, beseeching Heaven for mercy, gazing wretchedly at the human wreckage before him, staring at every sound.

His son had not yet arrived.

Anthime had been summoned immediately after the seizure. Had he started at once, he ought to have been home by now. His moral responsibility for the present conditions made it doubly monstrous that his place by his mother's death-bed should remain untenanted. She had forgiven him. Before the power of speech left her she had asked for him several times.

The unhappy husband could not bring himself to abandon hope. He watched and lis-

tened, feeling that the appearance of a son so idolized might even yet work the miracle of a cure. But his features clouded over as each fresh sound proved a disappointment; nothing stirred but the wind in the trees, a falling slate, or a creaking shutter.

Doctor Lancier entered, came to the side of the dying woman, and felt her pulse without raising her hand from the sheet. Monsieur des Lourdines watched his every movement intently. He saw him shrug his shoulders slightly and turn to stir some medicine with a spoon.

"Master! Master!" panted a voice at the door, "there's a carriage in the avenue! It is driving up to the door!"

"A carriage?"

"I saw the lights."

He rose, and turning giddy, steadied himself by the bed-post.

"Control yourself, I beg of you," interposed the doctor in a low voice. "Would you like me to go with you?"

Monsieur des Lourdines was too breathless to answer, but he shook his head. He pulled himself together with a struggle and moved slowly to the door. The effort was severe. It looked miles away!

In the passage he stopped again to gather breath. At the foot of the staircase he found the hall in complete darkness. He shivered and dared not move.

The front door had already been thrown open, and the wind and rain swirled in through the entrance. He stood motionless, trying to see what was happening. Outside, Célestin's and Frédéric's lanterns bobbed up and down in the effort to throw light on the scene. At length two powerful lamps shone through the darkness; there was a jingle of harness, steam rose in clouds from the heaving flanks of a pair of horses, and a travelling carriage drew up at the steps.

The door was opened hurriedly, a greyhound jumped out, followed more slowly by the head and shoulders of a tall man, and Anthime—Anthime stood before his father. Monsieur des Lourdines stared stupidly; everything swam before his eyes; he could see the glistening of wet leather, the trembling of tired horses' legs, but when he looked upon his son's features he only realized that they belonged to the man who had ruined his father and killed his mother. He forgot that he had summoned him imperatively to his

side, he just gazed in exhausted silence, hearing nothing but the beating of his own heart.

The greyhound trotted about the hall, investigating the unknown scene, his claws clicking on the hard tiles.

"To heel, Michka!" ordered Anthime, standing on the door-mat. "Frédéric, take my dog round to the stables! Where is my father? Is he upstairs?" he added, lowering his voice.

"Anthime!" was ejaculated weakly, close by in the darkness.

"Father!" exclaimed Anthime, starting. He put out his hands gropingly. They closed on a pair of thin, bowed shoulders.

"How is she?" he asked. "What is the matter with her? Your letter gave no details."

At that moment Célestin passed through the hall with the luggage on his back and a lantern in his hand. By its rays Anthime saw the terrible fixed look of misery in his father's eyes.

"Father! Father! Speak! For God's sake say something!"

He jumped to the conclusion that his mother was dead. Monsieur des Lourdines disengaged himself gently from his son's grasp,

wrung his hands, and turned in the direction of the sick-room.

The apartment was over-heated and smelt strongly of ether. The unaccustomed odour and the mysterious gloom about the curtained bed startled Anthime; he paused for a moment. A log of wood crackled on the hearth and shot up a long flame which lighted up the inert form lying among the pillows.

"Mother!" he hurried forward and fell on his knees at the bedside, pressing his lips to the hand nearest to him.

Monsieur des Lourdines followed his son's movements with vacant eyes. Anthime rose to his feet and placed himself where the rays of the lamp, which the nun held up, fell on his face, in the hope of awakening the dying woman's attention.

"Mother dearest!"

Her sunken lids remained half-closed over the glazing eyes.

"Émilie!" urged Monsieur des Lourdines, leaning over her, "Émilie! Here is Anthime! Your own boy! He has come back to us!"

She died a few hours later, just as the dawn broke.

Anthime sat alone in his own room, a large chamber from the walls of which hung heads of wild boar and roe-deer, and a huntsman's horn. He was racked by the conviction that his mother's death was the direct consequence of the stroke his own misdeeds had originally brought on; and the grown man, whose life had hitherto been one long pursuit of pleasure, who had never yet experienced the heavy hand of sorrow, was weeping. Great, hot tears coursed down his cheeks, like those of a child who seeks its mother and finds her not. His grief was sincere enough, but superficial and unlikely to work any enduring change in his character.

The sight of death had shaken him profoundly. He had always dreaded to be brought face to face with it.

He rested his forehead on his hand, and while his right hand played absently with a china saucer the tears flowed unchecked. He had been present at his Aunt Désirée's death, years ago, when he was a boy of ten. He had thrown himself wildly on the bed in a paroxysm of terror and grief, but when his parents tried to send him out of the room, he refused to leave; Frédéric had touched him on the shoulder and said: "Come and see the

horses, Master Anthime," still he would not go. Suddenly he saw his aunt's mouth fall open and her cheeks turn grey. He screamed.

The exhausting night of emotion he had just passed through merged itself into that nightmare of days and nights spent on the journey from Paris; it seemed to be the conclusion of it. Nevertheless, he was harassed by remorse. On that evening a week ago, when his servant had followed him to the Club to hand him a letter from his father, marked "Urgent," containing only two lines: "Come home at once. Your mother is dangerously ill," he had been playing baccarat with several companions, notably his great friend, Prince Stémof. He had not thrown down the cards immediately, but had continued playing, because he was losing and did not care to lay himself open to the suspicion that he was glad of a pretext for saving the rest of the money in his pockets.

But he hated to suffer, and never allowed himself to do so if he could possibly help it; therefore, true to his nature, he deliberately turned his thoughts from their present channel. He took off his coat and dipped his face in

cold water. The women must have finished their ghoulish work, and he wished to return to his mother's side. He hastily ran a comb through his thick curly hair and put on a dark coat which fitted tightly to his tall well-knit figure. He dried his eyes carefully and went down.

He found her stretched upon the bed, robed in white satin, her hair veiled in the black lace she had habitually worn when alive; around the hands folded upon her breast were twined the beads of a rosary. The features were set and swollen; they did not bear the impress of either peace or sleep. Even at this supreme moment, when his knees shook at the sight of his mother in death, he was struck by his father's face. The broad light of day falling directly upon it as he sat motionless by the window, revealed fully the ravages inflicted by grief and anxiety. Anthime was horribly shocked.

At that moment the servants entered, accompanied by some of the neighbours, among whom was Joseph, the weaver, who had been in the habit of spending his evenings with Estelle and Perrine.

The window was wide open, letting in a current of air, cooled and sweetened by the recent rain.

According to the custom of the country the late lady of the château was to lie in state, for the villagers to pay the last homage to her mortal remains. But in order to facilitate the passing of the crowd, she was to be removed to a couch specially prepared in a large chamber on the ground floor.

The moment had arrived. The nun approached the bed and raised the sides of the sheet, wrapping them carefully round the body; the spectators drew back, watching.

Jealous of their rights, Perrine and the domestic ranking next to her in the household went at once to the feet, and proceeded to twist the sheet into a rope; Frédéric also advanced.

"No!" broke in Monsieur des Lourdines unexpectedly, pointing to the head of the bed. "No! Let Anthime do his duty!"

Anthime started and looked appealingly, first at his father, then at the women standing ready at their post.

There was no response. He turned a greyish white and moved to take up his burden.

He realized vaguely that it might be fitting

he should share in the grisly duty of bearing his mother's form to her lying-in-state; but the impression produced upon him was frightful. His limbs shook under him and all his powers of self-control were called forth in the effort to keep from falling. The people followed close behind, reciting prayers.

The descent of the staircase was accomplished with great difficulty.

Anthime had to feel his way from step to step, like a blind man. His heavy footfalls gave out a muffled sound; he could only advance by leaning backward, straining to uphold the weight in his arms. The sweat broke out on his brow and drenched his cheeks. Every now and then, despite his strenuous efforts, the shoulders of the mother who had borne him, bumped with a hollow sound upon a step. He strove not to look at that which he carried, to turn his thoughts from the ghastly reality, but it was no use. There was a slight opening in the sheet above the head, and through it a tuft of grey hair had strayed!

At one moment he turned deathly sick and was forced to lean against the wall; so overcome was he that he neither saw nor heard warm-hearted little Estelle, who hovered about him deeply concerned, ready to assist

if necessary, exclaiming at intervals: "Oh, Monsieur Anthime! Shall you ever manage it . . . Are you faint, Monsieur Anthime? . . . You are so pale . . . Can you do it . . .?"

Monsieur des Lourdines walking behind, grieved in all his tender heart at the torture he had inflicted upon his son, but felt himself in some inexplicable manner the helpless instrument of the Divine Wrath.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

DECEMBER had laid its dreary grasp upon the country round. Since the day of the funeral, two weeks earlier, rain had poured down continuously. The sluicing murmur of water was omnipresent: water running underfoot, water falling overhead, water dropping from trees and eaves. No other sound, save that of the roughly swirling wind, was to be heard in the lonely land.

Petit-Fougeray had taken on its winter cloak. Rivulets of damp trickled down the brick walls, leaving black smudges in their track; sodden brambles and creepers, detached from their support by boisterous squalls, trailed untidily on the muddy earth beneath. The windows of the château remained shut. Unbroken silence had reigned supreme and depressing, since the moment when the funeral procession wound its way through the avenue to the mournful chanting of priests and acolytes. Almost it seemed as if the guests

had not yet returned from the ceremony, so tense was the universal hush. This morning, however, the strokes of an axe wielded by Célestin in the task of stripping the elm of its branches, gave some promise of life and movement.

When Anthime awoke, another day of gloom and greyness was forcing its way through the open casement, seeking to dull the cheerful roses on the flowered chintz curtains. He choked back a yawn, and clasping his hands under his head, lay watching Michka, who at the first sign of notice from his master had risen from his rug and now laid his nose on the bed, wagging his tail.

"What are you thinking about, old boy?" inquired Anthime, smiling lazily at the faithful hound.

The greyhound whined plaintively, replying in dog-language: "I am thinking of your English thoroughbred and your smart phaeton, beside which I love to stretch my limbs in a good gallop—I am thinking of the good food I get in Paris, and of many things besides. Master dear, let us go! I don't like this place, and the people here hate me!"

"Hullo, hullo! It's easy to see what's the

matter with you, my boy," commented Anthime, rolling cosily over on to his side, "but you must wait awhile." He pulled the bedclothes well up round his neck, and snuggled into the pillows, for he was a late riser. He thought of his mother. He had loved her indeed, but with the affection of a spoilt child, or a favoured cat, more than the understanding sympathy of a grown man. He had suffered cruelly the first few days after her death, but he reflected curiously that the very intensity of the gloom her passing had produced, and the utter absence of healthy pursuits wherein one might find temporary alleviation, were already blunting the sharpness of the sting which had tormented him in the early hours of his grief.

He only saw his father when he went to his room in the morning, to ask how he had slept. The unhappy man had completely broken down in health and was confined to his bed. He declined to see anybody and would not even suffer the doctor to be sent for; he never spoke, and spent the entire day alone, in the dark, for no one dared open the shutters which had been closed by his orders on the day of the funeral.

Anthime pitied him heartily and at the

same time shrugged his shoulders in half contemptuous tolerance of eccentricities he failed to understand: an attitude, it must be admitted, learnt from his mother in earliest childhood. Though his conscience troubled him for not having craved forgiveness after his first misdemeanour seven years ago, he could not but congratulate himself on having seized so excellent an opportunity of escaping the dulness of Petit-Fougeray, and resorting to the gay life of Paris! He had never regretted it. Whenever he cast a passing thought to Petit-Fougeray from his luxurious flat on the first floor of a princely house in the rue de Varennes, he recalled the stuffy smell of a dark outhouse full of rabbits and ferrets in hutches, and a tiled vestibule round which hung rows and rows of mouldy hats and old coats. These things constituted for him the atmosphere of "home."

He had forgotten the cheery boyhood marked by innumerable scrapes and the ever-indulgent affection of both his parents; he was a dandy now, a man of fashion, a pillar of that *"jeunesse doree"* which spends its evenings at the music-hall of the moment, sups at Maxime's and stakes a fortune on the turn of a card.

On the dreary morning in question, lying on a pillow smelling of a fusty linen-cupboard, his thoughts strayed idly to Nelly de Givernay, his mistress, and Prince Stémof, his favourite boon-companion; then he began to wonder about his mother's fortune. His father had made no mention of it so far, therefore he had no means of knowing what his share would amount to, but he expected something considerable. He rested his supposition on outside gossip, and, from certain hints his mother had occasionally given in his presence he felt justified in believing that he would come in for the lion's share of her possessions. As for the bills of exchange, he could afford to disregard the threats of that old usurer Müller; still if he inherited anything considerable, he would pay the brute something on account; and in the meanwhile, as soon as he got back to Paris he would buy Count de la Garnache's colt. He ought never to have hesitated about it; its nostrils were certainly rather contracted for a bloodhorse, but that blemish was redeemed by qualities of the first order.

Having thought the matter over in all its bearings and made his decision he rang for his fire and shaving water.

When the temperature of the room was warmed to his liking he threw off the bedclothes, stretched himself, and strolled to the window. It had stopped raining, but the general aspect was thoroughly depressing. The walls were stained with damp, weeds sprouted on the paths, and rivulets had forced their way through the gravel.

He turned hurriedly from the unattractive scene and began his ablutions. The scent of bath-salts perfumed the chamber. He debated whether he should change his trainer. If he could only secure the services of Anson, the Englishman, what an advantage it would be!

He stood before the glass in his soft-fronted shirt, curled his moustache, brushed his hair till its ruddy ripples shone, and put on a white collar and a black tie that showed up the azure of his eyes and the delicacy of his complexion. A well-fitting black serge suit completed his attire. He filled his cigar-case, and stood ready to encounter another idle day. Fashionable, dandified though he appeared, there yet remained something in his appearance that placed him a little apart from the mere pleasure-surfeited Paris lounger. In spite of the marks fast living had graven upon

his countenance, the sportsman in him still survived.

He went straight to his father's room as usual, and knocked. A muffled voice, from under the bedclothes, bade him enter. The shutters were closed, but the darkness could not entirely conceal the disorder of the apartment: clothes tossed here and there, a game-bag on the table amongst papers, quill pens, and sundry other litter.

The face on the pillow could only be dimly discerned under the shadow of the blue bed-hangings.

"Good morning, Father. How are you feeling to-day?"

"Not well, boy, not well," was the answer, in a feeble voice.

"Your room is cold. Shall I have the fire lighted?"

"Oh no. It is not worth while."

The sound, weaker still and more muffled, suggested that the speaker, tired out by the effort, was disappearing altogether under the bedclothes.

"Please make use of me if you want anything."

"Thank you—you might—yes, send Célestin to me, please."

Anthime went out of the room. He delivered his father's message and strolled into the courtyard with Michka at his heels. He had nothing to do and was bored to death. Impenetrable gloom brooded over everything. Even the grey wintry sky weighed like a leaden lid upon his shoulders. He stood about, idly watching the hens picking up worms; his eyes strayed to a paddock close by where Estelle was pulling washed linen out of a smoking cauldron and wringing it out. Something in her attitude suggested that she was weeping and he moved nearer to ascertain. When she saw him coming she hastily rubbed her eyes with an arm reddened by the steaming water in which it had been dabbling.

"What is the matter, Estelle? Are you in trouble?"

The little maid tried to speak, but sobs gained the mastery and she hid her face in her hands.

He watched her. She had unfastened her short black boddice at the top, to give more freedom to her movements, and the snowy chemisette above, hanging loose, revealed the soft lines of her full young bosom. He looked with pleasure at the sheeny texture of

the white skin: "But for her hands the child would be pretty," he thought to himself.

"Come, little Estelle!" he said gently, yielding to the temptation of putting his arm round her: "Take away your hands and tell me the reason of these tears."

But she only sobbed the more.

"Poor little thing!" he shrugged his shoulders and sauntered on, to the kitchen garden. He could hear the sound of a spade ringing on pebbly soil, from behind a clump of evergreens. He walked down a sodden grass-path, between rows of winter cabbages, whose outer leaves hung yellow and decaying. Pear trees stood in gaunt rows extending skeleton arms; here, part of a gourd lay rotting, there a startled cat darted away from among some dead dahlias. The boundary hedges stretched away on either side, russet and silver, like the singed remains of a conflagration. At the foot of a wall he came upon some old clothes of his own which had evidently been used to make a scare-crow; he kicked them aside.

He idled thus, absent-minded and uninterested until it was time for luncheon; ate his meal alone, and lounged afterwards on the

sofa in the drawing-room. He was utterly at a loss for something to do. His mourning prohibited shooting, the one amusement Petit-Fougeray was capable of providing; there were no young people in the neighbouring houses. So he yawned and smoked away the afternoon until four o'clock, when he thought he might find Frédéric in the stables, and have a talk about horses.

This day was typical of the others. He dawdled towards the stable-yard talking to Michka and smacking his leg with an old riding-whip he had found in a corner of the coach-house.

Frédéric saw him coming but continued his task of tossing hay into the mangers of the Pomeranians, two magnificent black horses which had been kept for the sole use of Madame des Lourdines, and of which she had been inordinately proud.

Anthime hoisted himself on to the oat bin and sat with rounded back and legs hanging on either side of Michka, gazing at the powerful necks stretched to reach their feed. Presently Frédéric's silence and the morose air with which he moved about his work attracted his attention.

"What's the matter, old man? Worrying about something?"

"Worrying, Monsieur Anthime?" repeated Frédéric, busily polishing a curb-chain.

Anthime looked inquiringly into the troubled face of the old servant.

"What is it? Tell me."

"We're all miserable, Monsieur Anthime, and that's the truth. The other day your father told Estelle he should not require her services any more, and—just fancy Monsieur Anthime! no later than this morning he said the same thing to Célestin! To *Célestin!*"

Anthime looked thoughtful and did not reply for a moment.

"Poor old Frédéric," he said at length, "I don't wonder at your being unhappy! I am frightfully sorry to hear that Estelle and Célestin have got to go. But you know what my father is, and the sort of life he likes to lead. Now that he is alone, I suppose he will not require so many people to wait upon him. That must be it."

Frédéric shook his head doubtfully.

"Hum!"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Monsieur Anthime, nothing." Then he added, scratching his head:

"I should like to ask you something, Monsieur Anthime. Of course I know it's none of my business, but after all I've known you since you were a little lad, so high, so perhaps you'll forgive me—are you going to leave us too? Are you going away from Petit-Fougeray?"

Anthime replied without hesitation.

"Why think of it, Frédéric! Of course I am going to leave! How on earth could I stay at Petit-Fougeray! What the devil should I do here?"

The old coachman stopped polishing, and slowly hung the curb-chains in their places on the wall.

"Then it's all over! Estelle gone, Célestin gone, you away, Monsieur Anthime! It's the end of the world, as far as we are concerned!"

Anthime did not relish the turn the conversation was taking. He began slashing the air with his whip.

Frédéric looked drily at him, picked up his broom and pitch fork and walked off: "I must go and see to Count Caradec."

Anthime followed.

Count Caradec, the erstwhile race-horse,

was not tied by the head in a stall, but enjoyed the modified freedom of a loose-box in which he could stand, roll, or stretch himself at will.

His master visited him regularly every afternoon at this hour. Anthime would stand pensively watching the wreck of his former treasure, going over in his mind the thrills and triumphs he had experienced on his back. The old horse was on his last legs. No one even troubled to groom him now. His coat stared in rough tufts, like a neglected lawn; his slender neck still showed signs of breeding, but his quarters drooped, and the projecting joints were connected with his flanks by a sagging fold of worn hide; the pasterns had not been trimmed for a couple of seasons; there were horny excrescences on his hocks.

"Come up, old boy!" said Frédéric, entering the loose-box. The old horse moved into a corner and turned his beautiful limpid gaze upon the two men. A nervous shiver ran down his shoulder.

"The Chazy gardener came here last year to try and buy him," commented Frédéric, tossing the litter on the ground and tidying it with his pitch fork; "he would have set him to carrying vegetables to market, so your fa-

ther would not hear of it: no, no, he said, I won't part with my son's horse!"

"He never got over the lameness that followed that bout of fever in the feet."

"No, he will always walk a bit tender. I have tried all sorts, blistering, compresses, everything. He is an old crook. Old horses are like old soldiers. The day comes when they are only fit for the scavenger."

"Look here, I want to get on his back! I must ride old Caradec once more!"

"Ride Caradec! Good Lord, sir!" Frédéric stared as if he thought his young master had suddenly gone mad.

"Yes, really," repeated Anthime, laughing at the expression on the coachman's face. "Put a saddle on him. Of course I shan't take him out of the park. I'll just go down the avenue, as far as the meadow."

Count Caradec was accordingly got ready and presently Anthime was in the saddle.

He had a pretty seat and looked well on horseback, though he affected the arched back and sunken chest of a jockey. He moved away at a foot's pace, quite content to feel his old friend between his legs. But the poor animal's paces were a thing of the past. He walked badly and dragged his feet.

Anthime took him under the trees, his slight figure swaying gently to the motion, a little hunting tune on his lips. He selected a narrow pathway between some shrubberies of evergreens leading to an ivy-covered wall forming the boundary of the demesne. Here the trees widened into a glade carpeted with ferns and thistles. This had been the daily walk of Madame des Lourdines, as long as she had been able to get about on her feet. She enjoyed the sharp scent of the box-trees and bracken. Célestin had put up a little arbour for her use just beyond the chestnuts, on the bank of the river. Close by, there had been a shrine; a rusty statue of St. Joseph still lay against the wall, with one arm snapped off.

Anthime sat leaning forward in the saddle, his eyes travelling indifferently over the scene. A deeper nature might have found many tender associations in it. But his childhood had been too thoughtlessly serene for sentiment. He had not been trained to think, nor remember, nor care. He lived entirely in the present, and just now the present, in its gloomy exile from Paris, was a pretty lugubrious affair!

On the further side of the wall, beyond the

narrow river, stretched a dreary-looking valley. The westering sun planed red-gold among rain-clouds; from the darkening heights above, a wet breeze was blowing, disturbing the dead leaves and diffusing the acrid odours of sodden bark, and pine-cones; it also blew searchingly on the old horse's long coat, disclosing little circlets of worn skin.

"Ho! Ho! So Frédéric hopes to see me winter here!" laughed Anthime to himself. He reflected that another couple of months spent at his father's side would amply satisfy the requirements of filial duty and decency. He fixed his piercing eyes away into distance, beyond hill and dale, as if he could see Paris. He thought of Nelly de Givernay, the music-hall singer whose lover he had been for the past eighteen months. Before that, he had hovered from flower to flower, too light-hearted to fall under the thrall of an enduring passion. But Nelly had changed all that. From the first moment he had heard her on the stage, he had fallen prone, bewitched, crazed by her charm. It was not so much her looks, which were but mediocre, as the quality of her voice, that arrested and enslaved him. Others failed to recognise its wonder-

ful attraction, but it contained some peculiar vibration which caused him shivers of delight and hypnotised him like a bird under the gaze of a serpent. There was the same tremulous ring in her light laugh. Oftentimes he would suddenly beg her to simulate merriment and mimic her own laugh; and he would listen ecstatically. There was no limit to the follies he had already perpetrated under her influence.

Now, with the silent trees above his head and the slumbering countryside spreading at his feet, his heart travelled back to her; he longed with a physical ache for the sound of her voice and fluttering laugh.

A real laugh suddenly broke upon his reflections. He started, shook the reins and urged his horse through some birch trees to the edge of the common-land whence came the voices. Two little girls had just crossed the river.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the elder.

"Good afternoon, little one. What's the joke? I heard you laughing."

"Oh sir, it's my little sister. You have no idea how funny she is!"

Meanwhile the younger, a child of five or six, was darting about, dipping her toes in the

water, trying to climb the trees, and enjoying herself to her heart's content.

"What have you got on your cheeks, you imp!" exclaimed Anthime, as she ran up panting, to exhibit her wet shoes and soiled pinafore.

"Oh, you naughty baby!" cried the big sister, giggling merrily. She flew at her and rubbed her face vigorously with her own pinafore, bringing a fine natural glow into the downy cheeks.

"She has put on wheat-flour out of the bin at home. That's the sort of trick she plays all the time. The other day she smothered her feet in it. You can't think how comic it was. She keeps us all in fits of laughter"—and the children went on their way.

The day was closing in. At the further end of a long avenue Anthime could see a portion of the buff-coloured face of his home, with all the shutters shut.

The merry chatter of the children receded in the distance.

Anthime tried to make Caradec execute a "volte," but the old horse had forgotten his training; he put him into a trot, but a sorry limping lope was the result; so he pulled him up, and his spirits sank still lower.

He turned homewards.

Passing through the courtyard he was surprised to see Maître Paillaud getting into his carriage with a big bundle of papers under his arm. Anthime wondered whether he had come about his mother's will.

"Well, Monsieur Anthime, how did he go?" asked Frédéric, coming forward to take the horse.

"He's finished, poor old Caradec!" returned Anthime. Michka bounded out of the house and overwhelmed his master with clumsy attentions.

"Good dog! Good dog!"

Passing the open door of the kitchen he overheard Perrine grumbling: "Did you ever see such cheek! bringing that great dog to his own mother's death-bed!"

"Meddlesome old fool!" he muttered angrily. "Who cares what she thinks?"

CHAPTER X

MAÎTRE PAILLAUD'S visit left Monsieur des Lourdines in the condition of complete mental and physical prostration apt to be produced by the extinction of hope and the actual falling of a long-dreaded blow.

On the sheet lay a packet of papers. "Seven hundred and fifty acres!" he sighed. He pictured oxen straining at the plough in the November haze, chattering girls sowing corn on the rich slopes, flocks of sheep padding back to the shelter of their pens at eventide. All this country realm, once his own, was passing from his reluctant hands; he was robbed of his personal share in the spring, the autumn, the fruitful seasons which had succeeded each other almost as his possession, for so many years, on his own beautiful land in Poitiers. "To see is almost to possess!" he quoted wearily as he pushed under his pillow the parcel of bank-notes the lawyer had just delivered to him: they were the price of three

properties, *Fouchaut, la Bernegoue* and one of the big farms at Marais.

He absently ran his eye again over a letter from a horse-dealer, promising to run over shortly and see whether the Pomeranian horses would suit his purpose.

He let it fall from his nerveless hand and turned to look at a picture which had been brought from downstairs and now hung on the wall over his bed. It was a portrait of his wife, painted in the days of her youth. It showed her in evening dress, with bands of black hair parted on the brow and gathered in a bunch of Grecian ringlets on the top of her head. He scrutinized the shining curls, the laughing eyes with golden lights in their brown velvet depths. His thoughts no longer pictured her in the helplessness of her infirmity, for death is oftentimes kind, and translates truth into poetry, for the consolation of the sorrowing survivors.

In life they had never been closely united. His ideals were not hers and she had often shown herself hostile to his views. But his gentle mind declined to criticize; even now after a companionship of thirty years he refused to judge her; he recognised the right of each soul to its own code of right and wrong,

its own opinions and principles, its own responsibility.

The slightly mocking twist of the lips in the picture reminded the bereaved husband of the shriek she had given as she fell into his arms. "Anthime!" The beloved son's name had been practically her last utterance. As her mind had remained clear for some days after speech and movement had left her, what mental torment she must have endured before unconsciousness brought merciful relief! He groaned: "Émilie! my poor one!" and his heart melted in pity.

His reflections passed abruptly to his son: What was he feeling? What was his attitude of mind? For the thousandth time he murmured: "What is to be the end of all this!"

He had originally intended to speak to him after the funeral and acquaint him with the situation, with all the severity of a righteously offended parent. But when the time came he found himself incapable of performing the task. He was so exhausted by grief that he could not have maintained the necessary sternness; all he craved for was rest and oblivion. He shuddered as he recalled the scenes that marked Anthime's first rupture with his parents and departure for Paris, and

shrank from a repetition of them: "What is the use?" he pondered. "The worst has already happened. Nothing can be done. Why not wait a few days until I am stronger?" So, as the only means of avoiding a *tête-à tête* with his son he had retired to bed and announced that he was too ill to sustain conversation. Like a wounded animal he sought the obscurity of his darkened room and brooded over his sorrow, his indignation, his apprehension of the future. The morning visits of Anthime were a daily torture. Several times he was on the point of speaking, but each time his courage failed and he let him go, angered at his own weakness, yet justifying himself with wise axioms, such as: "Silence is strength. Delay gives time for reflection. The evil that has been wrought cannot be annulled by reproaches."

But the real source of his hesitation was that, in spite of everything, his love for his son still reigned undismayed in his generous heart. Selfishness and ingratitude failed to destroy it. It survived triumphant as that son's best defence.

With the passing of time his feelings grew milder: "How could Anthime be expected to read the mind of a man so rigidly reserved

as I am?" he asked himself. "He does not know me, and I understand him very little better. It is my fault. I never studied his character. I attempted to do so at first, but my poor Émilie did not encourage it; in fact she did all in her power to throw difficulties in my way. I ought not to have given in! I ought to have insisted, and done what I thought right!"

He regretted not having made a companion of the boy in early life, and instilled the love of nature into him, instead of leaving him to plunge into foolish dissipation. He should have taught him to care for animals and trees, and talked to him of the eternal truths which sow the seed of life in the soul of youth: "For he is not a bad boy. He is generous and responsive. So much might have been accomplished!" Whole days passed, occupied with such reflections.

Monsieur des Lourdines was haunted by a thought which grew to prodigious proportions in his unhealthy solitude. It amounted to an obsession and at last one evening action became imperative. He spent a sleepless night, walking about his room, looking at the clock, longing feverishly for daylight. Once

he cried aloud exultantly: "Evil is more powerful than we are! It forces us to bite the dust. Yet we rise again triumphant, laughing in the sunshine, singing among the flowers!"

When Anthime entered his father's room a few minutes before breakfast he found him no longer prone among the pillows, but sitting upright, his eyes smiling in the light admitted by the open shutters and wide-drawn curtains.

"Good morning, Father. How—?"

"Ever so much better, Anthime," he interrupted. "I am sick of this room, do you know. I should like to get up and go out. Will you come with me? It would be a pleasure to me to take a long walk with you."

"Of course I will," replied Anthime, looking as surprised as he felt. "But is it wise? You are surely not fully recovered, and it might be imprudent."

"No, no. I must have light. I must breathe the scent of the forest. And I shall not be alone. You will be with me, will you not? Ah, my boy, I need light!"

As soon as his son left the room he rose from his bed, put on a dressing-gown and threw open the windows. The morning was

bright and bracing, the air fragrant with the perfumes of earth, milk, and hay. The few remaining leaves on the trees rustled in the soft breeze. Drops of moisture trickled down the tiled roof. He gazed at the little bit of forest which came within range of the window where he was standing.

When he appeared in the courtyard after luncheon, dressed in the old green coat, felt hat and long boots, Anthime who was waiting for him whistled to Michka. The dog bounded out of the woodhouse and stood, wagging his tail, and looking inquiringly at his master.

"No, Anthime. Do not take your dog with you."

"Why not? He will do no harm."

His father however repeated: "I prefer that you should leave him behind."

"Very well. Go lie down! Good dog!" called Anthime, following his father, but looking back over his shoulder to see whether he was obeyed.

Michka drooped his ears and tail and before returning to the woodstack stood looking after his master, evidently wondering mournfully what had earned him this rebuff. Presently he resigned himself, and yawning, trotted

back, lazily swinging his high, narrow quarters.

The two men strode briskly along the middle of the road, Monsieur des Lourdines setting the pace.

"It is not going to rain," he observed.

"No, I suppose not," Anthime replied vaguely. This country walk with no particular object, without even the solace of his dog to whom he might occasionally have whistled, did not promise much entertainment: of two evils he would infinitely have preferred hanging about the stables in the company of Frédéric and Count Caradec.

"What a funny old chap it is!" he mused; his father was not looking at all well; his big cloak and flapping felt hat emphasised the spareness of his figure and the pallor of his cheeks. Nevertheless he walked at a surprising pace, with his head thrown forward as if eager to arrive at a given point. His long staff prodding the ground at each step, and the game bag hanging at his side, made him look for all the world like a pedlar tramping from village to village.

"I suppose the poor old boy is going to talk to me about Mother's will—but I don't

see that Michka would have been in the way." He very nearly gave utterance in an airy way to the thought, as his eyes idly roamed over the land and took in the wintry aspect of the scene: interminable hedges on either side of the road, and beyond them fields and yet more fields, yellow, marshy, enclosed within trees and hedges of the same monotonous shape; to right and left, at the end of long by-roads, rustic-looking farmhouses standing each in its square of churned-up, muddy ground. The horizon was dotted with gnarled trees; the sky heavy with slaty clouds illumined from behind by a diffused light, white and woolly as asbestos.

Monsieur des Lourdines trudged on steadily. Anthime, lagging a pace or two behind, observed him critically.

"He does look a yokel! He is just like one of the peasants! No wonder, living year in and year out at a place like Petit-Fougeray!"

This peculiarity of his father had never struck him so vividly before.

"Isn't this the *Placis des Corbeaux?*" he asked presently. "Do the boys still come here to fight?"

"Every year!" answered Monsieur des Lourdines, halting at once.

They were in an open glade, where from time immemorial the youths of *Douet* and *Frêlonnières* were in the habit of meeting on St. Christopher's day, to wage war on each other. Without rhyme or reason, beyond that of ancient custom, they would fall to at a given signal, and belabour each other with might and main.

"And is not this the place also," continued Anthime, "where the old Bishop of Luçon, Monseigneur Corlazeau, used to mistake those pollard oaks bordering the road for men?"

"Ah, do you remember that?" cried Monsieur des Lourdines joyfully, looking into his son's face with emotion. "It is quite true. Monseigneur Corlazeau was very shortsighted, and returning at night from his pastoral visitations used to take those bent trees for peasants, come out to welcome him, and would give them his blessing. Fancy your remembering that! And this oak—does it recall any memories to you?"

"This oak?" repeated Anthime. "Why surely it is the one we used to call the Magpie's oak; I used to come and play under it with the boys of the neighbourhood."

A light from within irradiated the countenance of the delighted parent. One might

almost have sworn that the clouds overcasting the snowy sky had parted to allow a shaft of sunshine to fall across his worn face.

He started off again, walking at an even brisker pace than before.

They were now in the heart of the forest, winding their way through narrow tracks and brushwood tangle. They scrambled along between oaks, silver birches, and pines, at whose feet slumbered dank heaps of ragged bark and russet pine needles. They climbed up slopes riddled with fox holes and furrowed by little runnels of water caused by the recent rains. They emerged occasionally into some lighter spot which seemed to herald the limit of this vast abode of darkness, but invariably the trees closed in again and engulphed them into yet deeper obscurity. Whenever they caught a glimpse of the sky overhead, they saw the same leaden clouds, planing low, sailing slowly in their wake.

"Where on earth are you taking me, Father?" asked Anthime at length, lumbering uncomfortably at his parent's heels through a particularly impassable swamp.

"Never mind, Anthime—come—you will see presently."

"You certainly do know your way about

your old forest! You know it better than I do!"

"Yes. I know it better than you do."

Presently they came to a morass between two low banks. Monsieur des Lourdines floundered into the mud without hesitation, and sank in over his ankles; but Anthime preferred to pick his way along one of the banks, which he did very slowly, leaving fragments of his garments on projecting thorn bushes. The greasy soil slid from under his feet; he slithered on slimy moss and scratched his hands in trying to save himself, while his father, dirty and draggled from head to foot, stood on dry ground and watched his progress.

"Anthime!" he called, and his voice reverberated as if in a tunnel: "Why don't you go down into the middle? If you were only a small boy I would come back and carry you!" Anthime declared laughingly that he preferred thorns to mud, and proceeded on his arduous way.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed as he joined his father. "Why we've come right through on to the opposite side!"

They had, in fact, stepped out into light and space, and now stood under a vast misty sky.

High above them to the left, on the summit of a bare hill covered with granite boulders and golden bracken, stood a gigantic cross.

"What is the matter with you, Father?" The old man had stopped short, as if his breath had failed him.

"Nothing," he answered, laying his hand gently on his son's arm; "come with me. I want to take you up there."

After a steep climb, they found themselves at last above the rocks standing on the highest point of the district. It was called *"Le Mont de la Croix Verte."*

It was connected in Monsieur des Lourdines' mind with his happiest hours of peace and solitude. He had spent entire days there, sitting among the soft fern, watching the fleecy clouds above, the smiling country and black expanse of forest below, searching deep into the heart of things, coming gradually to the comprehension of inward truths which in the busy haunts of men must have eluded his tentative grasp.

It was his Mount of Olives.

On a base of solid stone an ancient granite cross reared its height, bare and uncompromising, dominating the country round for all time with a stern serenity that defied the storming

of the elements and the scorching of the unveiled sun's rays.

But the earth at its feet, the slimy blackened earth, jealously sought to hinder its bold ascent into pure ether by the clasp of a lush growth of lichens. These parasites, mingled with green mosses, and orange-coloured vegetable rust, clung to its stony base and ventured up its shaft, clothing it in a sheath of tawny velvet.

To the south a limitless country spread its breadth to meet sixty miles of horizon and bare hills.

The ascent had been arduous. Monsieur des Lourdines threw himself panting on to a rock which raised its knobby surface above the thistles. Wrapped thus in his cloak, his face shaded by the broad brimmed peasant hat, gazing silent and motionless into the far distance, he resembled a shepherd patiently awaiting eventide.

Anthime, standing a little behind, could just see his projecting cheek-bones and lean chin. He noticed how heavily his father drooped on the hard rock, and how completely oblivious he appeared to be of his surroundings or the presence of his companion.

"He is exhausted," he pondered. "Why on

earth need he have come so far! This view is certainly worth seeing, and the air is splendidly bracing, but we have got to get back again."

He supposed his father would now broach the subject of the will. In the event of his not doing so he cogitated how to lead the conversation up to it. But he dared not begin. The silence and immobility of the old man, the brooding expression of his eyes, and the loose clasp of his shrivelled hands around his knees impressed him.

"Perhaps he is praying," he thought, and followed the direction of his father's gaze, wondering whether he was looking at anything in particular, or only seeing visions.

Monsieur des Lourdines rose slowly to his feet.

"Look!" said he to his son. "Look at all that!"

"I have never been up here before," faltered Anthime uncomfortably, under the piercing glance now suddenly concentrated upon him.

His father stared still harder into his face.

"Mine! Mine and yours!" he whispered, with a wide gesture towards the distant horizon. "Breathe this air! Fill your lungs with it! It carries the scent of our own trees,

the smoke of our peat fires! Watch its direction—it comes from Petit-Fougeray, our home—listen to its song!"

A feverish excitement animated his voice and eyes.

"Anthime, I will tell you why I have brought you here. I want you to see with my eyes," he continued, in strangled tones. "I love this place—I came here first as a small boy—I used to come when I was a man like you are now, and again, up till the present time. All this that you see before you is ours—our inheritance from father to son. Look as far as you can see! Ah, if only I could make myself clear! Do you not feel, and see, and hear, all around, the bond that unites us to the land! Does it not envelop you like an atmosphere, this sensation of possession, of reciprocity! Do you not grasp the harmonies in the wind?"

Anthime promptly thought of the harmonies in the voice of Nelly, his enchantress, and had therefore no answer ready for his father.

"Listen, my son! I shall never come here again. This is my last visit. This place is intimately connected with all my past life, its joys and sorrows. After a long day spent here in peaceful contemplation, I used to return to

your mother's room—now that she is gone, I could not bear the pain of it. It is all over! I came to-day," he went on falteringly, with half-closed eyes, "I forced myself to come, for your sake! I knew you would not mind the long tramp, and I wanted to show you the Cross, the spot I love so well, where so many of my dreams have taken birth. Oh, Anthime —boy—if you could only understand! If you could know what divine music I have heard here!"

"Really?" said Anthime. He could think of nothing else to say.

"Yes, on stormy days—when the wind rushed from the forest and swirled angrily among the hills. I have said to myself: I must bring the boy here. I must teach him to hear the voice of Nature. His soul will expand within him, and he will understand."

Anthime was growing more and more uncomfortable in presence of an enthusiasm he was utterly incapable of grasping.

"In that case, Father—of course—well, don't you see, you must come again! Eh? Won't that be best?"

"No," was the answer, given in sombre tones. "I could not bear it. Since your mother's death, and just before, I have suffered

too much. I cannot face these things now, as I could when I was a younger man. I am growing old, my boy."

"Oh no," responded Anthime, who thought he saw his way to giving the conversation a more cheerful turn. "You are by no means old. Why, you should have seen yourself striding along an hour ago! I simply could not keep up with you."

"Nevertheless, Anthime, I am old. You do not know what that means—and more than that, you do not know what it means to grow old in solitude. When I look forward to living out my life alone here, without your mother, without . . . you . . . without a soul I know or care for, my heart sinks. I feel overwhelmed—I am like a rat in a trap. I have not the power to change my circumstances. The only thing I wonder is whether . . ."

He stopped. His heart beat fast. He scanned his son's features eagerly. His face had the rapt look of a believer awaiting the miracle for which he has prayed.

Anthime patted the worm-holes with the sole of his foot, and looked nervous.

"Poor Father!" he murmured. "I am frightfully sorry for you. But—"

"But what?" urged Monsieur des Lourdines feverishly. "What . . . what were you going to say?"

Anthime had no idea. He had nothing to say, but something was expected of him, so he added lamely:

"You must not take all this so terribly to heart."

Monsieur des Lourdines turned away abruptly.

In the far distance a single shaft of sunshine still glowed above a hill. For an instant he stared at it from beneath his frowning brows, then raised his head and looked at the lowering clouds. He had taken off his flapping hat to cool the burning of his temples.

Slowly he turned and faced his son once more. He scrutinised the tall, graceful figure and handsome face already marked with lines of dissipation; he recalled in thought the active little figure in knickerbockers and gaiters which had once run blithely by his side in long country rambles, and suddenly, with pain unspeakable that seemed to sear his very heart, he realized definitely that he had nothing to hope for in this quarter: that there was no answering gleam

in the hazel eyes that met his with a wondering stare.

His voice shook, as he repeated feebly: "You cannot imagine what it is to grow old, my son!"

"But, Father!"

"No, Anthime, you cannot. Moreover you do not know what it is to love!"

"Father, why do you say that?"

"I suppose," he continued hoarsely, "you anticipate returning to Paris?"

Anthime made no reply. There was that in the look his father fixed upon him, that dominated and restrained him. Without warning, the blood rushed to Monsieur des Lourdines' cheeks, his nostrils quivered and turned white.

"Unnatural boy!" he stormed.

To his own complete surprise he was suddenly possessed by fury; he was no longer master of himself.

"Heartless, wicked son!"

"What is it? Why do you speak like that?" stammered Anthime.

"Why! Ah, why indeed! I raise my helpless hands to you in pleading, and you refuse to see them! You close your ears to my un-

spoken prayer! Very well. I will no longer be silent! I will not spare you the pain you deserve! Müller has written to me—I would have avoided speaking of it, if you had shown one spark of love or sympathy for me in my bereaved old age. That usurer, that scamp, Müller, wrote and told me everything! No, do not attempt to deny! I have made every inquiry and I should not believe you. You have again rolled up a mountain of debt—twenty-four thousand pounds! Without a thought of us, or a hope of repayment. It is unspeakable! Unforgiveable! Still, I said nothing to you, I tried to make excuses for you. I told myself you had been thoughtless, led away by others. That would have been bad enough, but I hoped your better self still survived; I dreamed that the pangs of remorse and filial affection would bring you to me with outstretched hands to crave forgiveness and offer the reparation of your devoted companionship. Fool that I was! Idle dreamer! I brought you here, to show you the possessions of your forefathers, and appeal to your hard, dry heart. I could still have forgiven you, have made allowance for youth and inexperience. Had you said to me just now, of your own accord, when you still thought

yourself possessed of the means of independence: 'Father, mother is dead, and you are lonely! Let me stay with you and comfort you in your desolation!' Oh, Anthime, the joy your words would have given me, would have compensated for the torture I have borne in silence! I should have felt almost happy. I should have replied: 'My boy! My child! You have ruined me, you have ruined yourself—our lives are blasted—but at least your soul has emerged triumphant—at least I still possess your love! Come to my arms! I forgive and bless you!'"

His voice died away. Emotion choked him.

Anthime had listened in stupefied silence. His mind was torn with conflicting sentiments: astonishment at the strength of will which had kept his father silent until this moment; anger with Müller; profound discomfiture at seeing the financial worries he had borne so lightly, treated so seriously; wonder as to what his father would decree.

"But Father, I assure you, you exaggerate the situation. I have borrowed money certainly. I found myself forced to do so, to carry out a business enterprise—as a matter of fact, a breeding stable. But for goodness'

sake don't work yourself into such a state! These things are done every day—I shall find means of paying up."

"There is one more thing I wish to say," continued Monsieur des Lourdines in low, exhausted accents, passing over without comment the lie he knew his son had just told, and feeling that a whole world separated the two: "I intend to save the honour of our name. The money shall be paid in full. That is understood. But in order to do so, and to spare you the indignity of imprisonment I have had to sell everything. The farms are gone. Your inheritance is swallowed up—all the family possessions have passed out of my hands. We have only one hundred and twenty pounds a year left between us to live upon, and Petit-Fougeray and Charvinière. Henceforward we must live like the peasants. You must have thought my fortune was inexhaustible, you young fool!"

Anthime had turned livid, as he listened to his father's faltering words. He now leaned heavily against the stone cross for support:

"Who told you I was so rich, eh?"

Anthime was dumb. His face was distorted with horror.

"One hundred and twenty pounds a year! Surely you are only trying to frighten me!"

"Would to God I were!" his father answered in accents so tortured that all doubt was dispelled from Anthime's mind.

"You are punishing me, indeed!"

"Petit-Fougeray and Charvinière are all that remain to us!"

"Father, you have never done this! For God's sake, pause! Is there yet time?"

"My son, the affair is almost concluded."

"My God, it's impossible! It cannot, cannot be true!"

The wind was freshening. The day drew nigh to its close, in sober mood; instead of the glowing crimson, harbinger of a fine morrow, grey and green clouds hung sadly overhead, resting heavily on the crest of the distant hills.

Anthime had forgotten his manhood. He had thrown himself face downwards, and with arms twined round the foot of the cross, and head bowed over them, gave way under the sudden shock and distress of the news abruptly conveyed by his father's words. His heart-broken sobbing brought balm and relief to the old man. Never before had he seen a tear

in his son's hard eyes. Melted was his sudden rage, soothed his fretted nerves. He was glad that he had yielded to the generous impulse which stayed him in the midst of righteous wrath from informing that son that his mother's death lay at his door.

Presently Anthime raised his tear-stained face:

"Father, can you ever forgive me!"

"My boy, my boy, I also am guilty! I neglected you! I ought to have talked more to you when you were young. It is my fault as much as yours, and we must bear the penalty together."

He raised his eyes to the Cross which now towered dark and threatening in the dusk, above the prone figure of his son. A gust of superstitious fear shook him. He seized him by the arm: "Anthime, Anthime! Come! Come away! Let us get away from this place!"

Together they started hurriedly down-hill. Anthime moved like a man under the influence of drink. He stumbled over rocks, caught his feet in the gorse and brambles. He drew insensibly nearer to his father, and surrendered himself to his guidance. The latter knew instinctively that had the young

man been alone he would have fallen blindly into every pitfall. They walked close together, in mournful silence.

In the forest Anthime plunged straight into the slimy mud he had so carefully avoided an hour earlier. Monsieur des Lourdines' spirits rose at the sight.

The darkness under the trees was almost impenetrable. The men struggled forward in the eye of a gusty wind, which bellied out the skirts of their cloaks and swung the branches across their path. Slowly the moon rose in the sky.

They arrived at Petit-Fougeray, very late, very jaded. The servants who had been looking out anxiously for them, met them with lamps raised to look into their faces, wondering curiously what could have befallen them. Anthime drew the collar of his cloak above his quivering lips; Monsieur des Lourdines explained the reason of their delay in incoherent terms. The warm scent of the cabbage soup and the cosy light of the kitchen penetrated gratefully to his chilled senses.

Anthime refused the offer of food. He wanted nothing; but his father, half fainting with fatigue, sat down to a great bowl of

smoking broth and a hunch of home-made bread. Anthime went straight to his room. His throat was burning; he gulped down a draught of cool water, and threw himself just as he was on his bed. There he lay on his back for hours, staring vacantly into the darkness. He shed no more tears; he was too utterly crushed for any active sensation. Life was over; he was at the bottom of a yawning abyss, the sides of which had crumbled in and were stifling the breath in his lungs. Ruined! Penniless! Everything finished, while youth still ran in his veins! The thought was unspeakably awful! Hitherto pleasure and excitement had been his portion; now, the future held nothing more for him. It meant annihilation! Great God!

Later, a kind of delirium took possession of him. The words: "I have no more money —I have no more money," formed themselves on his lips and escaped him unconsciously, in ceaseless repetition. He remembered friends of his, the gayest of the gay, who had suddenly gone under and disappeared from ken. He had hardly given them a thought at the time, had certainly not realised what they were going through. Was he to join their ranks? Cheery little de Mellière, ruined, had blown

out his brains. De Mierne, that good-looking boy, ruined, had joined the Foreign Legion as a private. De Flibure, ruined, was never seen again. There were others, too. No one mentioned their names; they had simply passed into outer darkness, and the memory of their bright personalities and gay pranks had faded from men's minds. How on earth had he managed to share their fate!

He hardly knew where the money had gone. Cards? Yes, he had gambled certainly, recklessly. Women? He had prided himself on paying handsomely for his pleasures; his favourites had feathered their nests well. Still, he could hardly account for that great, vast, horrible sum of twenty-four thousand pounds!

Now he must endure a living death at Petit-Fougeray, alone with his father. His boon companions would shrug their shoulders and say one to the other: "Do you remember that chap, des Lourdines? He went the pace. He has gone under. Done for!"

Oh, impossible! Surely, surely, there must be some way out! But no—as easily raise his mother from her cold grave, as find twenty-four thousand pounds for that damnable Jew, Müller.

His father, lying on the other side of the wall, heard his heart-broken groans, and pitied him with the kindly compassion of age for youth. "Poor boy! He is taking it hard!"

CHAPTER XI

"THIS is the end of all things!" moaned Perrine, as she placed the thick bowls of coffee on the table at which her fellow servants had already drawn up their chairs for the afternoon collation.

She cut big wedges of bread and butter, as she spoke.

"The end of all things! Try and eat a morsel, my poor Célestin!"

Their fate had been known to them for some days; in fact, they knew far more than their master suspected. The reason was not far to seek. Lamarzellière's housekeeper was not likely to listen at the keyhole during business hours for nothing!

"Can't be helped! It would be worse to be dead!" observed Frédéric philosophically, between mouthfuls. He was not under notice to go.

"Death is the one thing we've all got to face, all the same!" answered Célestin gloomily.

He was to leave Petit-Fougeray on the next day but one. Forty-three years of his life had been spent under its roof. He had come there as a little shepherd boy of twelve, and he was now a grizzled, prematurely aged man of fifty-five. At the thought his throat tightened; he pulled at his collar, his arms felt heavy as lead. Jealousy tormented him too, for Frédéric could not be spared, on account of the mare, which was absolutely necessary for the service of the house.

"Don't talk of death," put in Perrine. "It's bad enough to have to see the innocent punished. I've felt it coming this long while. When Monsieur Anthime began deceiving his mother years ago, I used to notice how Master, who is a saint if ever there was one, shut his eyes to it. I could say nothing, for an outsider, however devoted, may not meddle in such private matters; but I grieved, for I felt that some day Master would have to suffer. They were so proud of that boy that they simply could not bear to thwart him—so they never trained him at all, and now he's only just missed being put into prison. Ah, he'll never be anything like his father!"

"His father!" repeated Célestin, frowning

heavily. "No, indeed! His father is a good man, and a good master."

"It's all very well for you two to abuse Monsieur Anthime like that," said Frédéric, joining in the conversation; "but I know him quite as well as you do—perhaps a bit better. There's no harm in the boy. He loved pleasure, and he's ruined himself for it—but he's warm-hearted and generous. He's one of those who never ask for change out of a sovereign."

Perrine stopped for a moment in her task of spreading bread-and-butter for the hungry household.

"I think he has no consideration for other people. Why, one Sunday, when I was on my way to Vespers, I met him riding his big chestnut mare—you remember the one, Frédéric. All of a sudden it stumbled and came down, and Monsieur Anthime rolled in the mud. I screamed, and ran up, and there he was, sitting on the ground taking off his spurs, and he calmly handed them to me and asked me to take them home for him. I had to go to church carrying a pair of spurs as long as my arm. I couldn't hide them anywhere. Everybody was laughing at me—Monsieur le Curé, and all. I didn't know where to look.

I tell you he thinks of nobody but himself. And think of the scandals he has been mixed up in! All those fast women he has taken up with! Don't tell me! My poor Master has enough trouble. It makes my heart bleed to see him walk about with his head hanging, so sad and so stern. And that great brute there," she added angrily pointing at Michka, who lay at his ease on the hearth, "look at him! Did you ever see such a great long ugly snout!"

"I've told you a hundred times already," said Frédéric, "that Michka is a Russian greyhound. If he hadn't that peculiar nose he wouldn't be a Russian greyhound. I've seen plenty of them, and I know. It's easy to tell, Perrine, that you've never been to Russia or Moscow."

"Oh, bother your old Moscow! I think it was the devil shaped this dog's nose, not Moscow, nor Russia either. Get out, you brute! Out of my kitchen! Off with you!"

She flapped a dish cloth at him. Michka opened his eyes and raised himself on his forepaws.

"Let the poor beast warm himself," advised Frédéric comfortably. "He's done no harm."

But Perrine advanced threateningly.

Michka rose and trotted slowly out, his claws clicking on the brick floor.

"Brute of a dog!"

At the same moment Estelle hurried in, rosy and excited.

"Well, what did he say?" questioned Perrine.

"Oh, he has been so kind!" answered Estelle, in a quivering voice. "He said he thoroughly approved of my marrying Joseph, and that Joseph was a good lad, and that I must be a good mother to the children that would come to us, and train them up in the right way."

"He may well advise that, poor man!"

"But that's not all; he added: 'You're a good girl, Estelle. You looked after Madame well, and now that you are going to be married, I should like you to have something to remember her by.' And then he took me to her room and gave me these two dresses: 'There, my child,' he said, 'you can make yourself some finery out of these.' And, do look, Perrine," continued Estelle, looking radiant, "they are absolutely pure silk!"

Perrine felt the stuff knowingly.

"My goodness, so they are! Pure silk! You are in luck, child. I should not have dared accept them."

While the dresses were being passed from hand to hand, a gig rolled past the windows and stopped at the kitchen door.

"Good-day to you all!" exclaimed a loud, hearty voice. "By Jove, you are cosy in here! It is pretty cold outside. Is your master at home?"

"I will send and ask," replied Perrine, looking inquiringly at the big fat man whom she could not remember to have seen before. He stood before her in iron-shod boots and a huge, circular leather cloak, a broad smile lighting up his good-natured countenance. "Whom shall I say?"

"He is expecting me. I am the horse-dealer, and have come to look at his nags."

"Very well. Estelle will run up and tell the master. Won't you sit down meanwhile, and have something to eat and drink?"

"Thank you. I'll take a glass of cider with great pleasure."

Estelle found Monsieur des Lourdines in his room, gloomily endeavouring to coax a smoky fire into flame.

After the scene with his son on the hill-top, he had cherished a faint hope of seeing him change his manner and throw himself into the

new life with some degree of pluck and energy. But such hope was already dying out. Anthime maintained an attitude of sulky reserve and kept away, loafing about idly by himself.

Now the old dread was agitating the unhappy father: he feared that the hot-headed, reckless Anthime would leave home again.

"Where on earth would he find means to provide for his livelihood?"

Yet that consideration alone would not be sufficient to keep him at Petit-Fougeray, if he were minded to transfer his penury elsewhere. What would become of the unhappy boy, without money, among strangers! As for himself, the idea of remaining utterly alone in the desolate fastness of his once happy home, filled him with horror. The solitude he had loved would be changed into a desert peopled with ghosts; the very thought made him shudder.

Sitting before the remains of his wretched fire, he thought out plan after plan to attract Anthime and keep him by his side.

"Surely we can find something to amuse him! He can always shoot. And we might play cards in the evenings. He loves cards. I will learn, and he can have his game every

night." He himself would go for cross-country tramps as in the old days, and would resume his violin-playing. How he had missed his violin! He had not touched it since the awful night that inaugurated the sorrows of the past few weeks. Yet it was the only remnant of his fortune he had been able to preserve intact. It alone had not changed; it was still his friend, confidant, and servant, ready ever, to provide consolation.

The consciousness of this power within him to forget and enjoy almost reconciled him to the prospect of a modest existence, buried at Petit-Fougeray, with a converted Anthime for sole companion. Their life would be calm and uneventful; each going his own way without interfering with the other, but always ready with sympathy or assistance. "Yes. I could bear it—a roof, and food, and pleasant companionship—but could Anthime?"

"All right, Estelle! Say I will be down in an instant."

The splendid animals seemed to scent admiration when the men entered their loose-boxes; they arched their proud necks, pawed the ground, and threw up their handsome heads

to stare at the intruders with velvety eyes overshadowed by heavy forelocks.

The dealer looked them carefully over in silence; he was versed in the art of banishing all expression from his countenance. He examined their teeth, ran his fingers down their legs, and asked to see their paces. Monsieur des Lourdines gnawed his nails and looked from the man to the horses, and back again. He could not bear to sell, yet feared to fail in disposing of them.

"They are fine animals," he hazarded. "My wife was proud of them. They have done a certain amount of work, but—"

The dealer beat his arms on his chest, and looked critically at the clouds.

"We shall have some snow before long," he remarked, with a shiver.

Frédéric led out one of the horses and endeavoured to make him trot, but he hung back. The dealer went behind, clapped his hands, raked the gravel with his boot, and made hissing noises. The horse tossed his head and trotted off, but at the turn, when he no longer felt himself pursued, he relapsed into a walk. The dealer grunted.

"Once more!" he ordered.

This time he ran alongside, kicking up the gravel, beating a devil's tattoo in his hat with the handle of his whip, leaping and shouting like a playful buffalo gone mad.

The performance was repeated with the second animal: clapping of hands, raking of gravel, waving of hat—but, like his comrade, the Pomeranian walked soberly on the homeward turn.

Frédéric, old and stiff, panted with the unwonted exertion.

Anthime, attracted by the noise, lounged round a corner and stood watching, leaning against a hen-house with his hands in his pockets. Monsieur des Lourdines caught his breath when he saw how pale and heavy-eyed he looked. The dealer did not recognise him.

"Hi, sir! Hullo! Will you make a noise behind that beast and get him to trot?"

"Anthime!" called out Monsieur des Lourdines, as if seconding the dealer's request; but in reality the cry was wrung from him by the sight of his son's gloom.

Anthime however disappeared hurriedly. He walked round the outhouses, entered the store-room by the back door, and, stumbling over stray potatoes and onions on the brick

floor, took up his position at a dormer-window, whence he could survey the scene unobserved. He felt as if he were in a dream. The horse was trotting, bending his swan-like neck towards Frédéric, who held the rein and laboured at his side; the bushy black mane and tail flew out behind. At the sound of the dealer's "Whoa! Whoa, then!" the fiery animal stopped suddenly, dug his hoofs into the gravel, snorted, arched his neck, and gazed in the direction of his comfortable stable.

Anthime watched. He would have given anything to interfere and prevent the sale, but with the sensation of dreaming still upon him, could neither move nor cry out. Now the horses are being ranged side by side, their backs and legs felt, eyes tested; then, leaning his elbows upon their quarters, the dealer speaks. Anthime sees his father's lips move, Frédéric's red neck sink sulkily between his shoulders. The dealer grasps Monsieur des Lourdines' unwilling hand, plaits straws into the horses' tails, ties them one behind the other to his gig, gets in, changes the position of the seat, laughs at some joke of his own making, pulls his comforter over his mouth, waves his hat, and drives off, followed by the two Pomeranians, with their handsome heads done up

in the serge bridles used by the peasants locally, to lead horses to market.

All this Anthime saw, and when it was over, he ran from the store-room and fled blindly, he knew not where. He scrambled through thickets and evergreens, and followed the path down to the wall whence he had talked to the little girls, from his seat on Count Caradec's back.

He rested his hands upon the wall, and his head upon them.

He could still hear in imagination the odious voice and fat laugh of the dealer who was even now carrying off the last tangible evidence of the state the des Lourdines family had hitherto maintained in the countryside.

So far Anthime had been spared the actual sight of the sacrifices entailed by his misconduct; but now the awful reality was driven home to his brain by the evidence of his own senses. Haggard and wan of face he clung convulsively to the dusty ivy on the coping of the wall. Oh, were flight and oblivion only possible!

From childhood he had been accustomed to give full rein to every emotion, whether pleasurable or otherwise. He had ignored the meaning of self-control; had never tested

his powers of resistance; thus he collapsed utterly under the first onslaught of ill-fortune. Of the brilliant man of fashion, there remained but a poor unstrung image of woe. His friends would hardly have known him; his eyes were dull, his cheeks flabby, his lips hung loose. He stood motionless among the falling leaves, his feet in the damp grass. The wind howled and the trees waved their sodden boughs. Around him reigned death and decay; in his heart, despair.

"My God!" he cried, raising his arms and clenching his fists. "If I could only undo it all!"

Alas, that futile cry of humanity: give me my time again!

The sound of his own voice startled him, and he moved away, following the line of the wall. A dry crackling sound reached his ears from the other side. He leant over.

He saw an aged crone bent double among the cabbages, picking up sticks. Her wide hips in their voluminous skirts were turned towards him. As he looked, she raised herself as if to ease her aching back, and gave a slight hopeless shrug of the shoulders—evidently times were not good, from her point of view, either.

To Anthime came a queer fancy: he and she had been brought to the same level by the relentless force of fate; he, like her, was a puppet, shoved hither and thither, without power of resistance. Instinctively he shrugged his shoulders, imitating her gesture of dumb resignation.

CHAPTER XII

ONE morning a couple of days later he was lying on his bed; it had become his habitual place of refuge, and he only left it for meals. The grounds inspired him with insupportable repugnance; he felt he could never walk in them again.

He lay with his head buried in the pillows brooding as usual on the cruelty of fate, cursing the wretchedness of his lot, anticipating with craven fear the dreariness of the future spread before him. The slightest noise of disturbance in the house rasped his fretted nerves.

Michka no longer lived in his room. The sight of the greyhound exasperated him. When he laid his paws on the bed, seeking a caress, he brought back all too vividly the careless luxurious days of the past, and his master would push him away with an oath.

On the morning in question, he lay idly looking at the roses on the wallpaper, trying to trace among the bunches the figures of a

man and a bull he used to imagine, weirdly outlined, during the delirium of an attack of measles, in early childhood. He used to amuse himself by the hour, with the fictitious adventures of the two.

He watched them now till he was tired and then turned on his side with a yawn and a stretch. At the same moment his attention was arrested by a violent noise, apparently caused by kicks from a sabot, on the outer gate of the courtyard. As the gate was not opened instantly, the kicking recommenced, and a tattoo was kept up until with squeaks and groans the great oaken portal turned on its hinges.

Anthime could survey the scene from his bed. He looked on idly, and saw Frédéric arguing with a stout peasant-woman, whom he presently admitted; she led in an old-fashioned hooded cart, drawn by a dapple-grey horse, whose tattered blinkers flapped backwards and forwards in the breeze like unfastened shutters.

Anthime had already forgotten the episode when he heard Frédéric knock at his father's door and inform him that Célestin's sister had arrived.

He understood at once the signification of her appearance, and a pang of regret shot

through him. Célestin and Estelle were leaving, and the woman had doubtless come to fetch them away. He wondered how he should bear to take leave of them, knowing full well that he alone was responsible for the parting.

How should he look? What should he say? Could he let them go without expressing his regret? He was fully conscious, though no word had been uttered in his hearing, that the servants were aware of his misdeeds, and were not sparing of their comments thereon.

He flushed angrily at this reflection. Shame bit into his being, but it was the wrong sort of shame—it was less remorse at having squandered a fortune, than humiliation at being reduced to poverty. He weighed the chances of avoiding the farewell scene altogether. He did not know what time had been fixed for the departure. If it was at once, he had but to remain in the seclusion of his chamber; but as his father did not stir, there was probably no hurry. It would certainly be against all the traditions of the château that a visitor should depart without the hospitality of a meal, and a feed and rest for the horse.

There was probably no escape for him. He would have to face it.

He rose with the heavy sigh of a man whose burthen is greater than he can bear, and leant out of the window. Yes, the horse was nowhere in sight, and the cart stood against the wall with the shafts upraised.

The courtyard was deserted. A few flakes of snow floated softly down. The cold was piercing. Anthime shivered, closed the window, and got back into bed.

He and his father met at luncheon. Monsieur des Lourdines was as dejected as his son. His eyelids were reddened and swollen. A comradeship of forty years was about to be severed. For three-fourths of a lifetime, master and man had laboured together for the improvement of the property; the master had planned, discussed, and superintended, the man had executed. It was Célestin who had laid out the paths to the river, dug the trenches for the draining of the meadows, erected the hen-houses, and sheep-folds. His handiwork could be traced all over the dwelling-house as well; rafters repaired, locks mended, mouseholes stopped, doors rehung. Célestin could do everything in the carpentering line, although he had never been taught—he was, besides, resourceful, good-tempered, kindly, and

hard-working. His loss could never be replaced; a portion of Monsieur des Lourdines' soul seemed to wither, with the exit of this trusted friend and companion from the daily life of Petit-Fougeray! He did not utter a single word during the meal, but as he rose from the table, he said:

"Estelle and Célestin are going away. You must. . . . I should like you to bid them farewell, Anthime."

They left the dining-room, Anthime walking behind his father. He followed him towards the kitchen, but stopped abruptly when he saw him open the door.

A buzz of excited chatter, led by the shrill voice of Perrine, ceased simultaneously; a hot smell of food and humanity escaped into the passage; he heard the servants push back their seats and rise.

His father entered, leaving the door ajar. He was on the point of following, and would doubtless have done so, had not the profound silence been hesitatingly broken by a voice, the voice of his father: "My very good friends," it faltered. Horror of horrors! Perhaps he also would have to address the household.

Furtively he turned away on tiptoe and escaped into the courtyard. He mooned about

with his hands in his pockets, but kept out of sight of the kitchen windows. Even outside he could smell the hot food.

Perrine had provided a feast for the last meal Estelle and Célestin were to partake of in the château. She had also completed the party by inviting some little children who occasionally gave their services in the fields, herding the cows or pigs. She wished them to see the last of the departing servants.

Anthime dawdled in the courtyard shivering. He longed to go away and hide, in spite of the contempt such conduct would arouse. But he lingered, thinking every moment would be the last; he cast searching glances at the windows, listened to the murmur of conversation. His father was in the midst of it, a friend among friends, whilst he waited outside alone! By his own actions he had cut himself off and would remain for ever, outcast and lonely. Shame and solitude must henceforth be his lot!

Snow began to fall faster. He felt the chill of it on hands and face.

He saw Célestin go into the garden, and turn towards the orchard: the old man moved automatically, and stumbled as if his sight failed him.

Then Frédéric crossed the courtyard on his way to the stables.

The sound of voices increased in volume. A skirt fluttered upon the threshold but withdrew again, as though the person on the point of coming out had thought better of it.

Now, a new impulse he did not seek to resist, drove Anthime forward. His hair and eyelashes were white with snowflakes. He could hear Frédéric soliloquizing while he slipped the harness on to the old woman's horse, and the dull thud of the latter's hoofs moving about in the stall during the operation.

He looked in at the kitchen door and saw people, piles of plates, the brass pendulum of the grandfather's clock swinging relentlessly to and fro; he heard some one say:

"It's coming on fast. You ought to be moving."

"Must expect snow at this time of year. Where are your traps, Estelle?"

The children, two boys and a girl, came out and seeing him, made their quaint little bows, smiling shyly into his face.

Monsieur des Lourdines made him a sign to enter. Frédéric, leading the horse to the cart, cut off his retreat from behind. He was

caught at last. A hush fell upon the little company; all the tearful eyes and swollen faces turned to him. He was greeted in respectfully friendly fashion. He could detect no shade of coldness, a fact which somewhat restored his equanimity. Célestin's sister alone managed to introduce into the manner of her curtsey something of the contempt the ordinary peasant feels towards a superior bereft of his supremacy of wealth and position. A tingling flush rose to Anthime's cheeks.

"Won't you sit down, my son?" asked his father.

"As the poor fellow has no wife," the woman said, continuing the speech Anthime's entrance had interrupted, "he will of course be welcome to a place at our chimney corner and a crust of bread. That is always something."

"Ready!" announced Frédéric, scraping his sabots at the door. "I have put the horse in the cart."

"Have you?" answered the woman. "Then, I suppose if everything . . ."

Estelle threw herself on to the settle and burst into loud weeping.

"Couldn't you let her recover herself a little, first?" suggested Monsieur des Lourdines, looking uncomfortably from one to the other.

"I would willingly, but the day is closing in, and my old gee is not a flyer. One has to keep whipping him all the time," and the woman pinned her shawl resolutely across her ample bosom. Estelle, her face buried in her handkerchief, sobbed on unrestrainedly, with heaving shoulders.

Anthime stood miserably by, staring at the fire. Perrine signed to Monsieur des Lourdines that the scene had better not be prolonged and leant over the girl, speaking gently and patting her arm.

"Come, come, my child—dry those eyes and be brave! You'll often be here after your marriage, won't you; and in the meantime, your village is not far away. There will be lots of opportunities for you to come over—and," she whispered confidentially, "I am not so young as I once was; perhaps, who knows—you are quite a good little cook! Come then, put away your handkerchief and see after your things. Is this your trunk? and what is that? Your bandbox of course. Make haste, child!"

Estelle rose. She was ashamed of her scarlet cheeks and tear-stained eyelids, and sidled timidly away in the wake of Perrine. The latter picked up the two packages and

flip-flapped out of the kitchen in her list slippers.

"She's just a baby, poor little thing," sighed the peasant-woman; "her tears come as easily as her smiles. But where can Célestin be? Célestin!" she called in the raucous tones of the field worker, accustomed to herding animals.

One of the small boys murmured something, shyly sucking at a twist of his pinafore.

"D'you know where he is?"

The little chap nodded.

"Then run and fetch him, there's a good lad!"

The three children darted off simultaneously like arrows from a bow.

Snow was still falling in large scattered flakes, which melted as soon as they touched earth.

The children soon found Célestin, and came back with him.

He walked with bent head like a man in a dream. He was dressed in his best: an embroidered vest of black cloth, and a flapping felt hat.

"Where on earth have you been hiding, my man?" asked his sister.

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly

with his gnarled brown paw, shrugged one shoulder in the direction of the kitchen garden, and mumbled: "Over there!" staring vacantly into space.

The woman climbed into the cart, pushed the luggage further back, arranged the seats, fussed hither and thither with little grunts and exclamations.

"There we are!" she finally announced.

Everybody looked, but no one moved.

"Now!" said Monsieur des Lourdines at last, with a visible effort.

"Now!" repeated Célestin, after a momentary hesitation. He had taken off his big felt hat and was crumpling up the brim.

"Master! Master!" he faltered.

Monsieur des Lourdines held out both his hands, grasping those of the faithful servant closely. "My poor old man! my dear friend!"

Célestin broke down. He wept openly with the absence of reserve of the lower classes; every muscle of his face was knotted and distorted, the tears chased each other down his cheeks. He attempted to speak, but failed utterly. He shook hands all round, seeing nobody. Anthime murmured something. Monsieur des Lourdines pushed him into the cart.

At last the two heart-broken retainers disappeared under the tilt. The woman took up the rope reins, the horse shook his head and started stiffly; the springs creaked, one wheel bumped roughly against the mounting-block, the vehicle pitched heavily, settled down, and rolled off.

When Anthime turned, he found himself practically alone. His father was nowhere to be seen; Perrine was just disappearing into the kitchen; only the three children remained, propped against the wall, silently staring at him.

He moved towards the stables and finding the door open, lurched through and threw himself face downwards on a truss of hay.

"This is my doing! My doing! No! No! it is not! I never dreamt of all this! It is that devil Müller! Damn him! Oh Stémof, old boy; if I could only be with you for five minutes!"

* * * * *

"Monsieur Anthime! Monsieur Anthime!" ventured Frédéric, in coaxing tones. "Don't! Don't lie there! You'll make yourself ill!"

"It's Müller's fault!"

"Monsieur Anthime!"

"Oh Frédéric, I am so wretched!"

"I know Monsieur Anthime. It's a black time for us all. But get up! Get up!" The old coachman was deeply moved, and knew not how to show his sympathy.

"Leave me alone. This is the best place for me. You go, and leave me!"

Still the servant did not move.

"Go, I tell you! Leave me to myself."

Frédéric hesitated, shook his head, turned away, and went out shutting the stable door behind him.

His sabots stumped about outside, a bucket was cluttered on to the cobble stones, and finally silence fell. Anthime remained alone.

CHAPTER XIII

ANTHIME passed through some terrible hours. Célestin! Estelle! His own losses, the frightful change in the whole aspect of life, regret for the vanished past, dread of the future, all mingled in one pain so unbearable as to be almost physical as well as mental.

He wrung his hands, called upon his friend and boon-companion, Prince Stémof, groaned, and prayed for death. How could he ever endure the only existence open to him? His mind wandered back to the delights of the past, dwelt again on the hateful interviews with Müller the Jew, travelled to his enchantress, Nelly de Givernay. Presently an awful thought occurred to him: why, when it became necessary to carry the body of his mother downstairs, had his father waved Frédéric aside and insisted upon his taking the gruesome task upon himself? Why, unless she had learnt his crime and died under the shock?

Was it a righteous punishment inflicted upon him by his remaining parent? A fresh spasm of misery shook him, and with a groan, he buried his head yet deeper in the straw.

It was quite dark when the sound of the dinner-bell recalled him to the exigencies of daily life. Habit, not appetite, brought him to his feet. He tottered across to the house. A heavy snowfall had set in, spreading a white pall over the earth, and entirely obscuring the house. A feeble glimmer behind a glass pane alone indicated the door.

He entered the dining-room. His father was already seated at the table. A shaded lamp concentrated its light on the white cloth, while it left the rest of the room in darkness.

Anthime sat down and drearily counted the drops of oil as they fell one by one into the glass reservoir of the old-fashioned lamp.

Neither of the men spoke. The shuffling of Frédéric's flat feet, and the rattle of china and silver on the sideboard alone broke the silence.

Monsieur des Lourdines observed his son covertly. He had never before seen him in like condition: hair unbrushed, hands un-

washed, dress disarranged, haggard and wan of face!

"This cannot go on," he reflected anxiously. "Something must happen! He will go and leave me alone again."

When Frédéric had finished waiting on them and had withdrawn to the pantry, Anthime cleared his throat:

"Father, I want to know. Did my mother hear of my debts before she died? Did she know the full extent of our losses?"

His breath came fast and his heart beat, so that his words were uttered with difficulty. His bloodshot eyes fixed themselves compellingly on his father's face.

Monsieur des Lourdines flushed, looked down, and fingered his plate unconsciously.

"No!" he blurted out.

But Anthime had noticed the momentary pause. He did not speak again. He sat back in his chair and took a long, deliberate look at his father; noted the high forehead, disproportionately lofty above the emaciated features, the blue eyes still so childlike in their expression of simplicity and benevolence, the heavy pockets beneath them, the pale lips, and thin, wrinkled neck. Then, rising from his

seat, he did a thing he had not done since early childhood.

He went slowly round to his father's place, bent over him and kissed him.

A ray of joy and surprise lighted up the old man's face.

He looked up kindly and said gently: "Going to bed, my boy? That's right, sleep well. Good-night, son!"

CHAPTER XIV

ANTHIME rushed to his room, seized the lamp from the table, and holding it high above him gazed with a scared expression into the further corners of the large apartment as if he saw ghosts lurking. He listened a moment at the open door, and finally put down the light and proceeded to walk up and down in a state of extreme agitation. Presently he sat upon the bed and gave himself up to reflection.

Should he return to Paris immediately and endeavour to earn his living? He might do well as a jockey. He had entertained the idea, vaguely at the back of his mind, all these days, but he was too depressed to face its difficulties. Now the thought of suicide was obsessing him.

It had burst upon him suddenly in the stables, when he realized that he had killed his mother. He began to consider it as a means of escape. With it came a curious lull in his suffering: the loss of his fortune, shame, re-

morse, the horrors of the future, ceased to trouble him. He drifted towards death and annihilation, not timorously, but with the mechanical indifference of an atom driven by overwhelming forces. In his present mood Death held no physical terror; nay, it offered release: for, he thought, to die by one's own hand is not a submission to a relentless force; it is rather the active snatching at an outlet which seeks to evade one.

To this phase succeeded another, one more natural.

The actual commission of the deed appeared full of horror. Anthime's teeth chattered, and a cold sweat bathed his face. He clutched the bedclothes in a terrified grasp. His wavering sight fixed itself on a boar's head hanging on the wall. How well he remembered the day it had fallen to his gun, and the jovial party which had celebrated his success in champagne!

He heard his father go to his room.

He resolved to give him time to go to sleep. Better still; he would not fulfil his purpose here, so close to the living; he would go down to the deserted wing, where nobody would hear or know anything for hours.

The house was quite silent. He opened a

cupboard, ransacked a drawer and took out a case containing two pistols. They were large horse-pistols, very fine antique specimens, presented to his grandfather many years before by an old Royalist general. They were loaded, as they had been ever since the time the gift was made. An inscription was engraved upon them. It ran thus: "From a White to a White."

He took out the old charge and reloaded them with shaking hands, pausing often to listen, fearful of interruption. His door must have been only half shut, for it suddenly burst open under the pressure of a heavy body. Anthime sprang to his feet and hid the pistols behind him. It was only Michka! The dog flew to his master, fawned upon him, and rubbed his head against him with little plaintive whines and yelps of joy.

Anthime made no response. He still grasped the pistols, and stared at the dog as if he had never seen him before. Presently, when Michka whined louder in his endeavour to attract his master's attention, he pushed him abruptly aside, and tried to say: "Down, Michka! Quiet, old dog!" But his voice stuck in his throat, and made no impression on the animal. He seized him by the collar,

and indifferent to his boisterous caresses dragged him down to the hall, opened the front door, and endeavoured to thrust him out. "Be off! Be off!"

A flurry of snow and wind forced its way into the house. The dog refused to go. He lay down, and drooped his tail. Anthime pushed vigorously, and finally despatched him with a hearty kick and closed the door. Michka barked violently for a moment or two, and then trotted slowly away.

Anthime stood alone in the hall, in the darkness. His father and the servants were probably asleep, participating in the nocturnal silence of ninety miles of deserted country: he could hear only the agitated beating of his own heart. Superstitious fears assailed him. He tried to get back to his room, moving slowly, inhaling with every breath the musty odour characteristic of Petit-Fougeray. A distant sound from the long corridor leading into the empty wing brought his heart into his mouth: something was stirring! A reed-pipe? A flute? No shepherds would be moving their flocks at night, nor in a snowstorm, neither would they be in the house. He recalled some of the weird fantastic tales he

used to hear from the peasants in the long winter evenings of his childhood. He shivered, and moved on a few steps. Now the sound was nearer, broader, more powerful. It was certainly neither a reed-pipe nor a flute. It was a violin! He was sure of that. He could tell by the peculiar sonorousness and vibration of some of the notes. Terror gained upon him. The experience was so unreal, so ghostly. Who could be playing the violin? Perhaps it was a phantom of his own brain. Of course! It was a hallucination, created by his mind, filling all his senses to the exclusion of reality. He reeled, closed his eyes and fell giddily against the wall.

With one shoulder propped, his whole sentient force concentrated itself on the pistols. He gripped them so tightly that he could hardly feel them; the sweat poured from his brow. He waited for the sound to cease, but it increased in volume. It seemed to be passing away, yet to gain in intensity. As no harm came to him his presence of mind gradually returned. He grew calmer, raised his head, and resolved to follow and identify it. He felt his way to the entrance of the corridor and slowly traversed its length. A nervous shudder thrilled him as he realized

that the tune came from the ruined chapel! A faint light was discernible through a crack of the door. With shaking hands he pushed it open. A flood of music overwhelmed him; he started back in amazement.

His father was playing the violin!

He turned to go, but the wailing of the strings drew him against his will. He advanced again, cautiously looked in, and stood riveted, astounded at the sight that met his eyes.

Monsieur des Lourdines' countenance wore a look of inspiration. The embrace his son had bestowed upon him earlier in the evening, had relit the torch of hope in his loving heart. There was no one with whom he could share his joyous emotion. Some outlet became an imperative necessity. He flew to his room, fetched his neglected violin and repaired to the chapel. Here at last he found relief. As in former days, he poured out his dumb soul in music. His fingers raced, the bow flew—new harmonies weaved themselves unconsciously, and as he played, his brow cleared, and his eyes shone with ecstasy. "Anthime! Anthime!" was his theme. The violin shrieked, prayed, rejoiced, triumphed.

He stood in the tribune; a candle placed on a projecting beam, his only light.

Anthime gazed with astonishment; he hardly recognised his plain little father, in this radiant master with the glowing eyes and flying fingers. He remembered to have heard vaguely in his childhood that Monsieur des Lourdines was something of a musician, but an experience such as this was utterly undreamt of. The music touched him strangely. The high, piercing notes excited him, the low wailing stirred and softened his heart. A voluptuous languor took possession of him; sitting on a step, his head buried in his hands, his spirit soared above him in heavenly dreams. Anthime remained as long as his father played. The cessation of sound brought him abruptly down to earth. He opened his eyes, and became conscious of the intense cold of the atmosphere. A blast of wind came in through the broken window, and caused the candle to gutter and throw fantastic shadows on the plaster of the roof. His father was still standing, rapt in thought, holding the violin under his arm. Anthime lingered, hoping he would play again; but when he saw him bend down to pick up the candle, he rose noiselessly and fled.

CHAPTER XV

THE snowstorm continued unabated all that night and the next day. At nightfall the stars shone out brightly from the face of a sky black as ink in contrast to the white mantle overspreading the earth. The snow was banked as high as the window-sills of the ground-floor, with never a scratch on its dazzling surface. Here and there a few belated flakes still fell. Petit-Fougeray lay peacefully buried under its pall.

The household was asleep. No smoke rose from the chimneys. The lamps had long been extinguished.

The moon rose beyond the woods; it peeped through the gaping window of the chapel where Monsieur des Lourdines was again playing; it planed resplendent above the tribune.

Anthime wondered anxiously whether its illumination would betray the secret of his presence; but he had established himself in a dark recess at the foot of the staircase lead-

ing to the tribune, and was quite safe. He had come early, to wait on the chance of hearing his father play once more. He had made up his mind to shoot himself afterwards. The pistols lay on the floor at his side.

The day had dragged wearily. The emotions of the previous night had reawakened the memories of past pleasures, and in particular of Nelly de Givernay, whom he had no prospect of seeing again in life. His longing for her was agonising, yet it had changed its character under the influence of his father's music: it was more spiritual, gentler; he was faintly conscious of the improvement. His better nature craved a renewal of yesterday's elevation into higher realms, before the final fall of the curtain.

He was quite close to his father, and could watch the expression of his face by the light of the moon. He trembled with emotion, for the cry of the violin had become extraordinarily poignant. The bow was as if possessed; it flew, bit into the strings, or lingered softly over them, guided by a master-hand. Its sonorousness was somewhat deadened by the low roof and confined space; yet the tone was magnificent, sometimes clear as crystal, then again round and full as a contralto voice.

Anthime's heart grew lighter. His impressions of the night before were not repeated. What he felt now was less violent, less torturing; he forgot Nelly; a soft glow pervaded his being, though the consciousness of pain remained alive within him: "As soon as he stops," he muttered to himself, "I shall relapse into infernal torture. I shall know again that life is insupportable!" He clung to his emotions, putting off the evil moment. Recollections of early childhood floated through his brain. He remembered the words of the old lullaby his nurse used to croon over him at bedtime. How did it go? It was all so long ago. Yes, something like this:

Je me suis endormi
leri
À l'ombre sous un thym,
Mais à mon éveillée
léree
Le thym était fleuri.

It was at Charviniére. His old nurse! He had not thought of her for twenty years, and now when the end of all things was at hand, scenes from his childhood sprang to his mind as fresh as if he had seen them yesterday: the valley and the old homestead, the hay-stacks

gilded by the sunshine, the wide fields of colza shining yellow as far as eye could reach!

Again the violin sang:

Je m'eu fus en flûtant
leran
Le long du grand chemin.

He was stirred through all his being by these recollections.

The tune suggested others, and his mind harked back to the old chanties and ditties that had soothed and delighted the days of his innocence; chanties never heard since, buried hitherto in oblivion.

The old man played on, air succeeding air. He appeared utterly unconscious of his surroundings, rapt into another sphere. Anthime watched him with amazement: could this indeed be the shrinking, reserved little man he had so carelessly taken for granted and disregarded! The face he now saw as if for the first time was radiant, glowing with passion; the movements of the body seemed concentrated into the swing of the bow; the cheek caressed the ruddy frame of the instrument; every now and then the dewy eyes raised their ecstatic glance heavenward. Anthime saw

that his spirit had soared far beyond the troubles of this world. There was something almost saint-like in the transfigured brow.

Like a flash, the true explanation Anthime had been groping for, came to him! His father's inspiration came from within—from his own beautiful, simple nature, and child-like mind! It was the intrinsic goodness of the man, that spoke through the violin. The instrument was the articulate medium of this dumb soul; by means of its thrilling song, he expressed the emotions of his faithful heart.

This discovery was a great shock to Anthime. It removed his father to a sphere away and above him and, completely revolutionised his attitude towards him.

In the meanwhile the music turned to wailing: Anthime understood that his father was going through the mental torture he himself had lately experienced, and with a groan he buried his head in his hands.

The direct rays of the moon had passed beyond the broken window. Deep gloom now reigned in the chapel. The candle had burned low, and gave forth smoke and a greasy odour.

Anthime still listened vaguely, but the eyes of his mind were turned inwards, and in these bitter moments he was learning the lesson of life. For the first time, he saw things in their true proportion. He saw what his father's life had been; how high his standard, how faithful his performance; then he looked into his own soul, and recognized its meanness. He remembered with a pang of agony how he, *he,* had dared to mock and criticise one, the latchet of whose shoe he was not worthy to loose. He longed helplessly to repair the evil he had done, to console where he had tormented. He realized the sordidness, sterility, triviality, of his life in Paris. He suddenly understood why his father had led him up to the foot of the Cross, and shown him Nature in all its breadth and glory. He remembered how his unhappy parent's voice had quivered when he said: "I cannot explain myself, but surely, surely, my boy, you understand!"

The song of the violin had indeed wrought the great awakening.

A fresh sound broke upon his reflections and caused him to look up in astonishment: his father was singing.

The quavering accents placed the climax

upon Anthime's emotion. They carried him back to the Croix-Verte and the sight of his father calling his attention to the land of his fathers. He understood now that pathetic plea: "You do not know what it is, to grow old! You do not understand the meaning of love!" He longed to hold out his arms in answer and cry: "Yes! Yes! Father, forgive me, for I know now . . . I know!"

The candle guttered out. The violin ceased from wailing. The old man's voice was hushed.

CHAPTER XVI

THE sun was sinking in the west amidst a splendour of rose and gold. Autumn, dank and hazy, held the country in its grip. The land was all under plough. Clouds hung lowering above the hill-tops.

Suire, the miller, seated sideways between two sacks of flour on the ample back of his white horse, was travelling along one of the grass-rides of the forest.

He was making his leisurely way towards Charvinière.

He was in no hurry; he sat, idly swaying to the ambling pace of the old nag, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

The ride led through a dark glade under the yellow leaves of ancient chestnut trees.

Presently he reached the edge of the forest. Before his eyes, the open country spread. He could see the red tiled roof of Charvinière, and further away, the sails of the mills of

Saint-Michel, Fouchaut, and Aiglonnières, turning almost in unison, showing white against the blue of the horizon. Suire gave them a quick glance, and then, skirting the forest, kept a bright look out for wild-game. Rooks rose in confusion, cawing their indignation at his intrusion.

Two dogs, a big mongrel and a greyhound, rushed out from under the trees, tumbling over each other, romping roughly.

A few yards further, he raised his cap in greeting to two men, but they did not notice him. They walked slowly, side by side. Had he not known them both intimately, he could hardly have told which was the elder of the two.

The old white horse moved on, carrying Suire to Charvinière, while the father and son pursued their ramble, becoming mere specks in the distance, until a turn in the road concealed them from view.

THE END